鎌池和馬
イラスト／真早
インテリビレッジの座敷童（ざしきわらし）9
電撃文庫

The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village - Volume 9

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イラスト／真早

雹(ひょう)
陣内家に居着いている雪女。あれ、なんかデカい……？
「う、うう……」
「……足の指はやめなさい、このケダモノっ」
斑(はだれ)
雪女の旧友その1。赤ちゃんを抱えた婚活妖怪の天敵。
「くっくっくっ」
霙(みぞれ)
旧友その2。ぐるぐるメガネで援護射撃がひどい。
「それで、ひょうちゃん。素敵な人とは出会えたの……？」
インテリビレッジの
座敷童⑨
鎌池和馬 イラスト／真早

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デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）

ドガン
座敷童・緋（ざしきわらし・ゆかり）
黒髪巨乳でゲーム好きな妖怪。恋この恋人期間もつかの間、世界を滅亡させる子ゾメノヂカヲコシにもってしまう。

な、なに
陣内 忍（じんないしのぶ）
インテリビレッジに住む、熱情に対かれやすい地元の高校生。通に座敷童が恋人になるのだが……。

インテリビレッジの
座敷童⑨

鎌池和馬
イラスト／真早

Prologue

This doesn’t have to be difficult. You only have to remember this one thing.

She in the red yukata is mankind’s enemy.

The Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi will bring ruin to all with her mere presence.

Absolutely and undoubtedly.

Chapter 1: Fill with White@Jinnai Shinobu

Part 1 (3rd person)

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata remembered.

As she dreamily dozed off, she pulled out the kind memories stored in the tidy drawers of her mind.

There was white snow outside.

But even if they were trapped at home by the bad weather, young Shinobu was not even remotely displeased.

“It’s cold, it’s cold. I can’t let go of your hand just yet, Nee-chan.”

“That’s odd. You feel warmer to me, Shinobu.”

“Sigh. Setsubun really was a lot of fun, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was.”

“But why did so many Oni show up? They were really packed in.”

“Well, while the rest of the country is telling the Oni to leave, we were only welcoming the fortune. They probably thought this was a nice shelter.”

They continued their discussion while watching the heavy blizzard out the window, but then Shinobu’s mother walked up with a barely-hidden smile.

“Heh heh heh. But the festivities have only just begun. Shiiinobuuu, are you familiar with February’s main event: Valentine’s!?”

“Hm? I’ve heard of that… Nagisa was getting really impatient about it.”

Shinobu tilted his little head and groaned in thought.

“Oh, right! That’s the day when Nee-chan gives me chocolate!!”

“Eh? But I’m not very good at cooki-…”

“Nee-chan gives me chocolate!!”

He repeated himself to cut her off.

He also looked up at her with sparkling eyes.

“I get snacks without having to do any chores! What a great day. How presumptuous.”

“No, um…”

“I wonder what kind of chocolate Nee-chan will give me. White chocolate? Strawberry chocolate?”

“Um…”

That Zashiki Warashi, who could not even make her rice balls triangular, grew flustered for once, but young Shinobu finally noticed.

The light of hope faded from his eyes and a disappointed look took its place.

“Are you…too busy?”

“Th-that isn’t it…”

“You don’t have to do it. Don’t worry about me. Besides, making chocolate has to be some kind of advanced magic. You don’t have to force yourself. Normal is best.”

Shinobu waved goodbye and started to leave.

“…”

He had said some admirable things, but he was clearly crestfallen and the heavy aura was evident even from a distance.

“……

“Oh, honestly!!”

Soon, the Zashiki Warashi was in the kitchen mixing the sweet-

smelling contents of a bowl.

Shinobu's mother, who was making some Western-style sweets, laughed in her apron.

"You may not have planned for this and you might complain, but you still take a stab at making the chocolate. That's the best thing about you."

"This isn't some moving story. When he takes it that far, it might as well be a form of violence. I clearly just gave into Shinobu's threat!!"

"If you don't like it, then why not just buy some chocolate for him? They sell French and Belgian chocolate online."

"Try doing that and I guarantee you his shoulders will droop as he gives you a disappointed smile!!"

"Oh, be careful while melting that. Go too far and the oil will separate and solidify on its own. Children can be cruel, especially when it comes to flavor. It's like some kind of spinal reflex. If they don't like even the smallest thing, they won't hesitate to call it yucky!"

"And without thinking about where people's talents lie!"

"They think adults are perfect at that age. And if you're planning to go the homemade route, you need to do it right to make a nice memory out of this."

Part 2

"…Nn…"

It was an unbelievably warm morning for December.

I rubbed my eyes inside the futon and finally realized why. There was someone else under the covers with me. I smelled a sweet scent like old incense, felt a soft sensation, and sensed the gentle warmth of body heat.

Before, I might have yelled at her and kicked her out, but things had changed.

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi. It’s getting pretty late in the morning. You need to get up too.”

“…”

I stuck my hand under the blanket and shook her shoulder, but she did not respond. However, she wasn’t actually asleep. She looked limp at first, but there was some slight muscular resistance.

She was feigning sleep, but what had she taken issue with?

“Zashiki Warashi! Hey, you Good-for-Nothing! …What, do you not like what I’m calling you?”

I tried calling out to her a few times and pinched her stomach.

I decided to change tactics and quietly whispered to her.

“Nee-chan, wake up already.”

She fidgeted a little, but that didn’t seem to be it either. I pinched her more gently than before.

Hmm, but what’s left? …I guess only that.

It embarrassed me since I still wasn’t used to it, but the lump under the blanket was excitedly waiting for it. I cleared my throat and turned the dial in my mind up to max.

Special Attack☆Lovey Dovey Mode: On!!

“C’mon, Yukari. Wake up. I want to see your face when I say good morning.”

Only then did a sullen look pop out from below the blanket. That good-for-nothing and sexy Zashiki Warashi wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me.

She rubbed her cheek against my chest while I thought back on the recent “change”.

Yes.

We were a couple now.

Part 3

Everyone must have been busy because the Zashiki Warashi and I were the only ones at home.

We ate breakfast together with a mosquito net covering the kitchen table. Breakfast was a fried egg and a salad, so it had likely been made by my mom who loved Western food. I poured milk into two cups and stuck two pieces of bread in the toaster. I didn't feel like just waiting around for a few minutes, so I moved to the neighboring living room and switched on the TV.

“

“Nothing good on the news today either.”

“Is there even anything cheerful going on these days?”

Meanwhile, the toast finished. The Zashiki Warashi and I left the TV on as we returned to the kitchen and pulled out the hot toast. I put butter on mine and placed the fried egg on top, while the Zashiki Warashi spread a chocolate paste on hers. Then we both began eating.

“Aren't you going to make yourself sick eating that much chocolate first thing in the morning?”

“I think I was dreaming about chocolate. I don't remember the details, though.”

We continued our breakfast with the news playing in the background.

“Zashiki Warashi, make sure you eat your celery.”

“Ugh…”

“Yukari.”

“Then feed it to me.”

“…”

“No one’s watching. Right?”

I didn’t really like it, but even as a couple, the Zashiki Warashi hadn’t lost her habit of taking the superior position. Whenever something worked against her, she would reverse our positions, even if it had to be by force. To me, it looked like a self-destruction strategy.

And thus, I ended up placing the thinly sliced celery on top of the Indoor Youkai’s charming tongue.

Once we finished eating, I captured the lazy Zashiki Warashi and made her help me clean up. After that, we lined up side by side to brush our teeth and wash our faces. I felt a stinging in my eyelid, so I may have still had some detergent on my fingers.

“C’mon, Shinobu. Don’t rub your eye like that.”

“But…”

“Your Onee-chan will dry it off with a handkerchief.”

“You don’t get to call yourself that when I have to swallow my embarrassment and call you Yukari!!”

Meanwhile, we moved from the washroom to the living room. I stepped on something along the way and realized it was the morning paper. I glanced down and read the headline.

“

?”

It was even dryer than the TV news and didn’t catch the interest of a high school boy like me. It wasn’t good material for conversation either.

We didn’t have anything to do now that breakfast was over, so we lazed around. I was wearing a hoodie with the front open, a shirt, and some rough pants, so I’d gotten lazy with my clothing. It was only when we were alone together, but she let me rest my head in her lap pretty often.

“Shinobu, should I clean out your ears while I’m at it?’

“You did that yesterday, didn’t you?”

“I want to do it as many times as I can.”

I had no real reason to say no, so I let her. I was repeatedly attacked by the temptation to go back to sleep, so I continued speaking with the Zashiki Warashi while dozing off.

“Come to think of it, Nee-chan. I’d like to take a bath with you.”

“!?”

“Hey, wait! What was that scraping!? It didn’t hurt, but that scares me even more!!”

“Th-that was your own fault. Where did that come from all of a sudden?”

“Well, Love Master Jinnai Shinobu feels like he’s done just about everything, but he still hasn’t taken a bath with his girlfriend.”

“Shinobu’s first… N-no! You can’t trick me!! Besides, we took baths together all the time when you were little!!”

“With. His. Girlfriend.”

“Uuuhhhhh!!”

The hermit crab of her heart seemed to have withdrawn.

I would need to be a little cleverer, but that could wait until next time.

“Didn’t you want to ask me something?” I asked.

“I can’t seem to beat the event battle in this zombie FPS. Medic! Mediiiiic!!”

“Why are you always alone even with online games? Is it because you never leave the house?”

“I-it’s called being a proud solo player. I’ll tear your heart to shreds if you keep that up.”

“What kind of idiot plays a major event battle on their own? Do you *want* to get killed?”

“That’s why I’m asking for some help from a plain and inconspicuous medic. Will you do it or not?”

She already had tears in her eyes. In most online games, the healer was an important role that was in high demand. The high firepower characters were really only any use in the offline campaigns.

“Fine I guess. When does the next event battle begin?”

“Eleven in the morning.”

“Oh, yeah. Didn’t some PTA get angry because late night event battles turned kids into sleep-deprived zombies? But anyone logging in at this time has to be outside the norm as well.”

“Okay, Shinobu. All done. …Hoo.”

“Gyawah!! Don’t blow in my ear! It makes me shudder!!”

“Time for the other one. Roll over and let me see it, Shinobu.”

I ended up lazing around even more.

No Youkai-related incidents or Packages turned up, but they were fulfilling days.

I had everything I wanted.

It felt silly to ask for anything more.

Part 4 (???)

Nekomata: “Oh? Are you sure you’re fine with that?”

Part 5

The promised time arrived.

If we really wanted to take on the event battle in the best possible

environment, we would have been holed up in our respective rooms in front of our computers, but it felt stupid to speak over headsets inside the same house. It would slow things down a little, but I was lying in the Zashiki Warashi's room and logged into the game console using my ID.

The Zashiki Warashi was using a full-spec tower desktop she had put together herself for gaming. You could get decent benchmarks out of a laptop bought for a few tens of thousands of yen off of a late-night shopping show, so not many people did that these days.

"Y'know…if you've got this expensive computer in your room, why are you always swiping my laptop and smartphone?"

"When I just want to surf the web in the living room or on the porch, something mobile is a lot nicer."

With a glance back at the Zashiki Warashi messing with her 3D goggles, I clicked the icon for the zombie FPS already installed on the machine. An update file screen appeared, so I waited for it to finish. Meanwhile, a banner ad appeared at the bottom of the screen.

"

!!"

"I always have to wonder if anyone's really stupid enough to click on those things."

"But without ads, the service wouldn't be free."

"So it's a necessary evil."

"I think there was a way of paying for an ad free version. How much was the monthly fee again?"

"It's a necessary evil!!"

The Zashiki Warashi moved her flat screen monitor from the tea table to the floor. With the gamepad in one hand, I enjoyed the online game while shoulder-to-shoulder with her.

The zombie FPS was essentially a game where the human player shot all the zombie CPUs. However, the player could become a zombie under the right conditions and you could throw raw meat

onto the field to lure a bunch of zombies into the enemy camp.

“No matter how much money they spend on the polygon models, they just aren’t scary after you’ve seen the real deal. It makes you want to complain how unrealistic these zombies are.”

“Kh!”

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi-san! Hey, you worthless Nee-chan that came to rescue us, automatically turned into a zombie even though she wasn’t bitten, and ended up causing all sorts of trouble!! Gau gau gau!”

“W-we settled that already, didn’t we!? We had that day-long purification ceremony where I was punished by adding ‘nyan’ to everything I said and called you ‘master’!!”

My cute girlfriend blushed and grew quite flustered.

Of course, I wouldn’t joke about it if it had really traumatized her.

By the way, the latest trend in the zombie FPS was to ignore the zombie hunt and begin firefights between the humans while those walking landmines wandered around. Oh, and there was a popular video of someone ignoring all the rules and doing everything they could to protect a little girl zombie.

“This is one hell of an event. I mean, a thirty meter Titan zombie? The original Titans were monstrous enough. This is supposed to be a modern warfare game, but we’ve traveled back to the age of Greek mythology.”

“Online and social games like to fall back on legends when they run out of ideas.”

“This has done a lot of collaborations with other franchises lately, hasn’t it?”

We were firing like crazy on the screen.

Shooting the giant didn’t actually do any damage. That only exhausted it. Once it ran low on stamina, it would gasp for breath and veins would bulge out all over its body. Those were what you had to attack. In other words, the trick was to efficiently attack during that limited opportunity.

“Ahh, ahh! Why!? I run out of ammo at the worst possible time, the veins go back in, and his stamina recovers! C’mon, Shinobu! Ammo! Ammo!!”

“You don’t have to yell. I’ll give you the ammo I picked up here and there either way. And do you really need those 3D goggles!? If you’re just after a decent score, the flat screen has got to be more efficient. You’ve been shaking your head around and it’s getting in the way!!”

“It isn’t a game if you aren’t enjoying it!!”

“Try to make that sound profound all you want, but you’re the one that came crying to me because you couldn’t beat this event. Besides, why are you using bullets like they expect you to? Do you love the management staff or something?”

“?”

She looked confused and rested her head on my shoulder.

Don’t try to seduce me into telling you, you evil woman! Of course that’s gonna make my heart pound!!

“There’s a chainsaw and circular saw for breaking locks, right? Those do a ton of accumulated damage every second. I think it’s even more than the Gatling gun. Get close to that slow Titan’s leg with that and I bet it’ll be gasping for breath and showing its veins in about ten seconds. The normal soldiers with guns would headshot you before you got close, but this thing’s wielding a giant club and it should be easy to distract since it makes a counterattack when you face it and fire on it.”

“Shinobu.”

“But a medic is pretty good with any support weapon that isn’t a gun. They might lose to a specialized combat engineer when it comes to a crowbar or duct tape, but I think they have an A rank with the circular saw.”

“Shinobu!! Kyah! I love you!!”

And thus began the nightmarish scene of the fighting medic standing on the front line wielding a circular saw against a giant. The Zashiki Warashi, as the proper soldier, fell back and focused her rifle fire on the veins as they bulged out.

This was only a game, but it felt like we were defeating a tank with a bamboo spear.

But wasn't this supposed to be a realistic military game supervised by a former Green Beret sergeant?

"Oh, ohh, ohhhhh!! I've never seen this screen before!! That odious Titan is collapsing!!"

"Celebrate if you want, but don't get crushed by the falling body. Knowing this development staff, they'll definitely count that as a hit and say you died even after making it this far."

"And the special reward is a Santa costume and ten million stars! Kyahaa!!"

"Hey!! Aren't you gonna share some of that!?"

I shouted back at her as the safe and reassuring results screen finally appeared.

Of course, I wasn't leaving completely empty-handed since the rejoicing Zashiki Warashi was hugging me and rubbing her cheek up against me! I had joked about the advantages you got by being beautiful, but I felt like this was providing numerical proof of that.

Part 6 (???)

Yuki Onna: "Don't you think this is awful?"

Succubus: "What is?"

Yuki Onna: "That Jinnai Shinobu and that slovenly Youkai ended up dating all of a sudden. She made full use of the unfair advantage she has from knowing him since before he was born and then it was a zombie outbreak that clinched it!? Does that mean I would be in her place if I had been there instead!?"

Aoandon: "Hmm. With you, I think there wouldn't have been any trouble and you would have easily slaughtered all the zombies to get him home. That wouldn't have been all that memorable."

Yuki Onna: “Ggffh! Curse my high specs…”

Aburatori: “Well, she did apparently go to save him on her own, turned into a zombie on her own, and had him save her on her own. …If that was all a plot to get him to fall in love, I don’t think I could ever trust another woman.”

Succubus: “I think the real difference is the Zashiki Warashi’s sexy body versus your flat body.”

Yuki Onna: “M-my white clothes are a symbol of virginity, so once I lose that, my body and attributes will change. In other words, once Jinnai Shinobu violates my virgin snow, I will become a plump adult Youkai!”

Aoandon: “Yes, but that first step is hopeless. You’ve locked the keys inside the car of your life.”

Yuki Onna: “Ghh!?”

Nekomata: “So are you just going to give up? Are you going to let that pair of giant breasts have him?”

Yuki Onna: “I never said that. There is no law forbidding polygamy for Youkai. I just have to exemplify a type of charm she lacks. That means I have a chance to receive some of his love on the side. Welcome, Jinnai Shinobu. You will now veer off the proper newlywed course and onto the inescapable course of love and hate!!”

Marguerite: “Are you really okay with that? I guess most anything looks happy if you set the hurdles of life low enough.”

Aoandon: “Mwa ha ha!! But if Jinnai Shinobu gets married, then I automatically come with him as something like a daughter!! Heh heh heh. A high school boy with a daughter.”

Yuki Onna: “Shut up, daughter. I am not at all interested in what they call an oyakodon! We can set up a rotation if you want, but don’t you dare climb into the same futon!!”

Nekomata: “You’re fine with a rotation?”

Furutsubaki (Small): “Sigh. Marriage is the standard way for a Youkai to repay a debt, but we’re never going to reach an agreement when everyone else is so stupid and keeps lowering the

bar…”

Part 7

My shoulders gave a small jump when I overhead that conversation as I rolled up the HD cable connecting the game console to the TV.

I honestly blurted out the thought in my head.

“What kind of epoch-making idea is that!? Polygamy is okay…? Then, then! Can I have the Zashiki Warashi as my Youkai wife and Madoka or Nagisa as my human wi- owww!!!???”

“…”

“I was- I was just kidding!! Don’t give me that sulking look! Did the double-punch of unfaithfulness and calling you ‘Zashiki Warashi’ put you in this bad moo- gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?”

You know how you want to tease your girlfriend when she gets jealous? Well, I certainly didn’t expect to get a strange wrestling move as a counterattack!

A-agh! My diaphragm! I can’t breathe!!”

“Y-Yuka…cough…Yukari-hyan!! Pant, pant! Please just hear me out!!”

“What is it? A death poem? Then go ahead.”

“Just so you know, straddling me like that in your kimono probably isn’t a good idea!! I can kind of see everything! You don’t wear panties, remember!?”

“…!!!???”

“Eh heh. For such a sexy body, it’s amazing how perfectly hairless you are down- gyaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

I was beaten up just a little bit.

After working up a sweat, the Zashiki Warashi swept her hair back with the composure of the victor.

“Honestly, you have no idea how to treat a lady, Shinobu.”

She then folded a cushion in two and used it as a pillow. She was lying on her side and she beckoned me over with a seductive fingertip.

“Come on over here. Your Onee-chan will teach you.”

“…”

Um.

Uh.

I know she has a self-destructive habit of trying to act superior when she’s feeling cornered, but…

“I don’t want to hear that from a centuries-old virgin. I mean, who was it that started crying last night as soon as I turned out the lights and leaned over you?”

“Gh!?”

“And just so you know, that crying started when I’d only grabbed your shoulder and pushed you back onto the futon!! I hadn’t even taken off your clothes!! Hell, I hadn’t even given you a goodnight kiss!! What about that was worth crying over!?”

“I-I was scared… I’m not used to seeing that animalistic look in your eyes.”

She hesitantly looked away while sweating nervously, but this was an important issue for me. For a teenage boy, it was a life-or-death issue! It was more important than the entire planet!!

“And why have you been keeping everything off limits even though we’re a couple now!? You’ve got that sexy body and I can’t even kiss you!? Is this some kind of torture!? Am I that guy in Greek mythology or whatever who’s submerged up to the neck but can’t drink a single drop!?”

“Shinobu.”

She cleared her throat to try to calm herself down.

I could tell she was trying to regain control and argue her way out of this, but I wasn’t going to give in that easily! You couldn’t

underestimate Jinnai Shinobu, the boy with surprisingly decent grades who was known as the Intellectual Yakuza, was elected class rep, and had been forced to handle Madoka!!

“Besides, isn’t it unnatural for humans and Youkai to do that kind of thing? I mean, we might look similar, but we’re completely different lifeforms.”

“But Hafuri is half-human and half-Zashiki Warashi.”

“Kh! Even the best system is fragile when there’s a counterexample!!”

“And if old stories are fine, there’s one about a Yuki Onna doing it with a double-digit number of mountain men, absorbing a lifetime’s worth of energy, and giving birth to ten children with her beloved human husband.”

“Just how energetic is that marriage-obsessed Youkai!?”

“So let’s do it!! If you don’t think we can have a kid, then we just have to keep doing it until you do!! Majina left the future to me and was erased by the alteration to history, so I’ve decided to carry out his final wish (Sparkle). So let’s do it!!”

I seriously moved in toward my girlfriend who was striking a seductive pose. We’d already established that, nine times out of ten, love was the result of the mood or the atmosphere, right? She could be selfish, but she could also give in surprisingly easily. We’d even started dating when I pretty much said “Eh? Weren’t we already a couple?”, so this would work! I could do this! I could!!

But once I leaned over her and grabbed her slender shoulders, her leg shot up. She kept the leg bent and placed the sole of her foot against my solar plexus.

She then used the momentum of a roll to throw me with her leg. I flipped 180 degrees in midair and landed on the tatami mats like a swinging door.

I had just enough time to recognize it as a type of tomoe-nage before I crashed to the floor.

“Gbhah!? Cough, cough! Ah…ahh!!”

“Sorry, Shinobu. I know you tried to make it hard to say no by

acting cool and mentioning that final wish, but I just can't. Now continue doing your impression of a seal."

"You…you do understand you're supposed to be my girlfriend, right?"

"Shinobu, there's more to being a couple than physical contact."

"But there's something wrong when there's *none* of that!!"

"What!? You can still stand up after that!?"

"It would seem you can't contain your surprise, but don't underestimate youth. That's the thing about puberty! If a girl in a miniskirt tells you she'll take off her panties in front of you, you'll gain the passion needed to stop a giant meteor!!"

"Shinobu, I think you have a twisted idea of youth."

Our late-night "wrestling" was transforming into a real martial arts match, but I was up against a Youkai here. When I raised a bizarre war cry and charged at her, she grabbed me and swung me around with a single arm before launching me horizontally.

"I-I'm not done yet! You haven't broken my arms or legs! I can still stand!!"

"You can still go zombie mode without a Kasha? Then I suppose I should give you your last rites."

She shook her head in annoyance and reached into her ample cleavage.

She pulled out (my) smartphone, displayed an image, and held the screen out toward me.

"Shinobu, look at this crayon drawing. Special Attack☆We're All Friends!!"

"Gyaaaaah!! Wh-what!? Where did you find that drawing!? And why did you take a photo to save it for all eternity!?"

"Sigh. Why did you draw the leaves green and the sun red? It is cute, though."

"Please stop… Don't distract me with heartwarming memories now! Ahh, the Jinnai Shinobu gauge inside me…is shrinking… Nooooo!!"

I hung my head from the physical and mental attacks.

W-we may have started dating, but does she still have complete control of me? Are you okay with that, Jinnai Shinobu!?

“U-uuuh. I guess physical attacks are useless. A high school boy is no match for her.”

“Heh. What did you think you could do against a Zashiki Warashi who can freely manipulate even the world’s destiny?”

“No fair!! You’re bringing up the still-unexplained Ver. 39 power for this!? That’s Hyakki Yakou’s secret weapon. Don’t even think about using it against an amateur high school boy!!”

“I-it was self-defense. It doesn’t count.”

This was clearly an impossible no-win scenario, but passion was boiling in my gut with nowhere to escape. I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I started hitting the tatami mats while curled up on the floor.

“No fair!! No fair!! I’m dating what might as well be the epitome of beauty, so why can’t I have any kind of fun with her!? Wahhhhhhhhhh!!”

The Zashiki Warashi grew confused at my unexpected reaction.

“Sh-Shinobu? C’mon, it isn’t worth crying over, is it?”

“It is!! Even boys are allowed to cry sometimes!!”

“You’ve been through a war between Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon and you survived that hellish zombie outbreak, so what in the world is going on inside you now?”

“The perfection created by the bizarre triple seven of beautiful, sexy, and virgin is within reach, but I can’t do anything with her!!”

The Zashiki Warashi grew even more flustered.

Her mature-looking face blushed like a child’s.

“A-ahem. Shinobu, try not to shout personal information concerning virginity so loudly. …But I see you do admit that I am beautiful.”

“I wouldn’t date you otherwise!!”

“I’m a little irked by how quickly you said that, but I’m also a little ashamed that it makes me happy…”

“If you have even the slightest pity for this pathetic boy with tears and snot covering his face, then open your body to me, Yukari-san!!”

“(Angry)☆ You know, Shinobu? Do you really think anyone would be stupid enough to give up their virginity out of pity?”

“Then at least use your hand! And while you’re at it, use your long hair too!!”

“Shinobu, I don’t quite follow. Use my hand for what?”

“Eh? Well you take this like this, and…”

“…!? Don’t pull that from your pants with that puzzled look on your face!!”

Part 8

I decided to calm down for the time being.

I was inside the Zashiki Warashi’s room, napping in her futon. I was lazily wearing the same clothes whether I was asleep or awake, so I may have quit the courtship dance now that I had a girlfriend.

The sexy Youkai climbed under the covers with me as if it were completely normal.

Sleeping in the same bed mode: on☆

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi. Where exactly is your line between yes and no?”

“Th-this is a Youkai trait of mine. So this is fine! At the very least, it’s a tradition that I’ve followed for over three hundred years!!”

“Ehh!? Then what was that earlier!? You’re touching me! You’ve got all sorts of body parts touching me now! If this level of contact is okay, then let’s go a little further!! Can I touch you? Those things

are just gonna go to waste, so can't I touch them!?"

"Shinobu. Squirm any more than this and I intend to drive my knee right into your balls."

Her cold voice sounded serious, so my balls shriveled up a little.

You're kidding, right? The passion is leaving me!? You have got to be kidding! M-my adolescence is willing to give in to oppression!? C'mon, Jinnai Shinobu! Don't let this get to you!!

Meanwhile, the Zashiki Warashi was acting like a cat curled up on the porch.

This was the most relaxing position for her, but that was why she didn't want my unnecessary ideas getting in the way.

"Ahh, this reminds me of old times…"

"You make that sound like there's a problem with who I am now."

"Reflect on your actions before saying that. Yes, you were so pure back then. What happened to the Shinobu that climbed into his 'Nee-chan's' futon because he was afraid the lightning would steal his belly button?"

"D-don't be silly! I had no choice but to do that because that 'Nee-chan' was so afraid! I was being heroic!!"

"I knew you'd never come over unless I set it up that way. You were clearly about to cry but trying to act tough, so I put together that plan. And call me Yukari."

Talking about the past only caused my passion to wither away even more. Was she intentionally creating a mood that prevented a certain part of me from making a major comeback!?

The napping Zashiki Warashi pulled out (my) smartphone from between those breasts she was tormenting me with and she began swiping her index finger across the screen.

"Checking through the online news from bed is such bliss."

"It's easy to forget you're an Edo-period Youkai when you say things like that."

If I complained now, she would crush my balls, so I called it quits

for the time being. I was waiting for my next opportunity, though!! With no outlet for certain feelings, I lay face down with the Zashiki Warashi as we pressed our cheeks together and looked down at the smartphone screen.

“

?

”

“Not much interesting news.”

“At times like this, you just have to visit a cat picture site.”

We amused ourselves looking at a cat stretched out on its back in front of a stove or a cat sticking its head inside a cat food box. Our Nekomata could be even more thoughtful than a human like me, so she didn’t show off this defenseless side much. She was technically a deadly Youkai, so I was afraid of what would happen if she got high on catnip.

…*The Nekomata, huh?*

I casually pondered that Youkai’s name.

At the same time, a Youkai slipped in through the slightly opened sliding screen.

The Nekomata walked over to the intimate couple (with one of them boiling over on the inside) and gave us a scornful look.

Then she spoke.

“So how long are you going to keep up this farce?”

Part 9

……

Part 10

I slowly narrowed my eyes while lying next to the Zashiki Warashi.

“What is it, Shinobu?”

The Zashiki Warashi only looked confused.

No, I was pretty sure *she really did understand.*

I thought back over the news I had seen here and there during the day: the TV, the newspaper, the banner ad, and the online news. I thought back over all of those articles I had seen.

“Due to the global panic caused by the chaos surrounding the world’s government bonds, the American dollar, the European euro, the Chinese yuan, and other currencies are continuing to crash. The rise in value of the relatively stable Japanese yen continues to accelerate, so rates for the yen are shooting up.”

When had this started?

Oh, right. It had already begun by the time I somehow managed to end the zombie outbreak in neighboring Bozen City, returned to the thatch-roof house with the Zashiki Warashi, and started dating her.

There were two types of Zashiki Warashi.

The type that preferred wearing a white kimono brought fortune and the type that preferred wearing a red kimono brought ruin.

And my “Nee-chan” – that is, Yukari – had the insane power known as the Ver. 39. That overwhelming power to bring ruin was too much for even the Ver. 40 to restrain with her ability to manipulate the destiny of the entire world.

The dollar and the euro were crashing, but it was far worse than that.

How had this happened and what was happening? Apparently not even Madoka understood it. All I can explain are the actual phenomena.

It all began with something known as government bonds.

I don’t actually know that much about it, but government bonds are apparently something like a special bank account. People place their money inside it by buying government bonds and the gathered money is used to keep the government operational. The money

people deposit there gains interest at a set rate. From what I can tell, you get more interest than in a normal bank, but you can't take the money out as easily. The government asks you to buy the bonds and uses the interest as an incentive. Basically, when the government takes on debt like that, it's called a government bond.

But the value of these government bonds is apparently determined by some extremely complex calculations. A stable country with lots of assets and resilience provides little interest for their bonds and a country that could undergo an economic collapse at any time and really wants to gather money will provide huge interest for their bonds. Of course, if they actually go under, you lose both the interest and the money you gave them, so I don't think many people want to buy bonds from that kind of country.

Ultimately, countries prefer to have valuable bonds with low interest but high stability. People feel comfortable buying up their bonds, so the government can easily grow quite rich.

The value of government bonds is not just a problem for that one country. It also influences friction with the neighboring countries. The calculations are difficult for amateurs, so there are specialized rating agencies that provide a simple rating for people, such as AAA or Default.

The problem is that the major credit rating agencies (e.g. Globe & Ingot or Gold Web) tend to be in America.

Ever since those credit rating agencies were established, America has never fallen below the AAA rating at the very top. Even after the fall of the Big 4 and the IT bubble bursting, they never dropped down even once. After all, if the value of their own country dropped, the credit rating agencies themselves would lose money.

And recently, a few countries that America found inconvenient had their ratings drop. I have no idea how much of this is only rumors and it might all have been mere coincidence, but everyone who saw it had the same thought:

Can we really trust American credit rating agencies like Globe & Ingot and Gold Web?

Shouldn't we make our own, more trustworthy investigative agency?

That much was natural enough.

But the problem came when several new credit rating agencies popped up around the world and began releasing completely contradictory ratings.

Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, South America, the Middle East, Oceania, etc.

This did not cleanly break the world up into economic blocs. It wasn't that organized. Everything was mixed up like a marble pattern.

The value of 100 yen was only meaningful if everyone agreed that was 100 yen.

If what Person A thought was 100 yen was just 10 yen to Person B and 1000 yen to Person C, they could not settle things at the register. An argument would break out over something as simple as buying a rice ball.

That was the current situation.

The American credit rating agencies like Globe & Ingot insisted that America had a AAA rating, the European Triple Roses said the same about the European nations, and the Chinese Pengjia Gongsi…did they even use the alphabet? Regardless, they wanted to give China the highest rating. Meanwhile, they liked to give enemy countries or countries they disliked the lowest rating of Default.

Simply put, the value of every country's bonds was thrown into a black box. One list said it was AAA, but another said it was Default. With several if not dozens of contradictory lists, no one knew what was accurate. If layer after layer of colored cellophane was placed over the scenery, no one could say what color it had been originally. It was like carefully going through all the data and then having even more paperwork thrown at you, until it was all diluted by the sea of data.

To us, government bonds were something like a bank account that earned a different sort of interest, but they were really another name for national debt. When their value could not be determined, it directly affected the trust in the yen or dollars that country used.

The world economy was going to grind to a halt.

Or should I say the central driving force had already stopped and it was only coasting on momentum now?

“Will the government begin printing new money? Could there be a one million yen note?”

But there were apparently some exceptions.

The world’s bonds and currencies had died because of the contradictory reports from the different credit rating agencies. With some saying “The dollar is the best!” and some saying “The dollar is trash!!”, no one knew who to trust or how to deal in that currency.

But there was another possibility.

There were countries that had not been the target of any of the credit rating agencies and thus every agency gave similar ratings for them.

Those countries had been mocked as no real threat, but that lack of caution meant they were not highly rated by anyone yet not considered in default either.

So despite all the colored cellophane covering the map, there were air pockets were not even a single layer of cellophane had fallen.

There was no chaos there.

But in all things, the value of scarcity was important.

Humans liked to put a price tag on everything. Even safety and stability could be a special weapon if there was little enough of it.

Costa Rica, Iceland, the Solomon Islands, etc. Those countries had been left behind by the prideful center of the international economy, but that was exactly what had allowed them to remain as the few untouched regions. Those untouched countries had constructed their own network and dealt safely in bonds. They had kept their data in motion. Why? Because it was magic. Despite the global panic, the value of their bonds remained unchanged and they made secret dealings within a field that outsiders could not touch. That ended up looking so very desirable to the people who could only watch.

It was just like an online auction or an affiliate advertising program.

They worked everyone up as much as they could and tormented them as much as they could.

They intentionally placed strict purchase limitations on their bonds so foreigners from outside their network could not touch them. That created a restricted holy ground which allowed the value to skyrocket. It was just like a smiling young lady in a prestigious girl's school.

And after the value of their "invisible product" had risen and risen and risen as far as it would go, what would happen if they finally sold it "outside"?

It was the simplest form of alchemy in the world. It was a magic trick.

The seller enjoyed a return of one hundred or even one thousand times their initial investment and, once they calmed down, the buyer was disappointed with the surprisingly "normal" bonds they held. Their own country's currency was treated like trash and they had sold off their jewels and cruisers and whatever else to obtain this last thread of hope, but they could only grieve when they discovered it was not worth what they had paid.

Only those who had begun the process profited.

It was as simple as attaching a false report of authenticity to a UFO video and then selling it.

And once they had a taste, they could not stop.

People could make all the accusations they wanted on online message boards and rating sites, but no individual opinion could stop the magic at this point. Even if someone did post the truth, no one believed it. It was just like the yen and the dollar which were relatively stable despite actually being buried in debt. That was just how much people trusted the prestigious girls school that was the closed network.

Intellectual Village vegetables may have been the same thing.

The brand was more important than the actual product. It was enough to stamp out any complaints or dissatisfaction.

Thus, people around the world continued seeking that network. They wanted to use it more than they wanted to destroy or equalize it. They wanted to join the seller side of that magic trick to infinitely raise the price of bonds. Government bonds were national debt, so there were purchase limitations and fail safes. Simply put,

if foreigners monopolized the bonds, they could influence national policy, so bonds were made so the country's own citizens had priority in buying them. That meant only the countries in the network should have been able to make free use of that magic trick. But everyone still wanted to find a loophole that allowed them to be one of the sellers.

Now, a question: what country did the world's seven billion people think they had the best shot at slipping inside of?

The answer was Japan.

That strange country had a fair amount of money and made decent contributions to society, yet it had still been underestimated.

In other words, people wanted inside that network which could infinitely raise the value of government bonds like a pure prestigious girls school, and Japan looked like the back entrance with the weakest security. That carefree country was obsessed with the ultra high-quality brand-name Intellectual Village vegetables, but they did not track what happened to the fruit seeds they exported. The rest of the world was annoyed that, with textbook English and some knowledge of the internet, the average middle school girl could carry around a brand-name bag and shop around for a summer home, but they still wanted to take advantage of that carefree national character. It could be borrowing someone's identity, a false marriage, or anything else. They wanted to use that lax country's lax system to gain Japanese citizenship and slip inside the much more strictly managed network. They wanted to make as much money as they could before their trick was discovered and then they would run off with their newfound riches. It apparently isn't actually that simple in reality, though.

The blessings of that network and getting inside it were simply that important.

It was an issue of dreams, just like all the young people who move to the big city despite knowing the risks.

It was a bond rush.

It was an insider dream.

People like Madoka may have actually calmly taken a step back from all that. She had said something about growing sick of the ridiculous commotion and searching out liquid commodities that

did not fluctuate as much as gold or platinum.

Whatever the case, things had gotten crazy.

I'd heard that satellite photos of the earth showed the city lights noticeably spreading only at those various air pockets.

Everyone who took part in the alchemy had gone crazy, from elementary school kids to the presidents of investment companies. In the city, people apparently waved stacks of cash around to hail a taxi and it wasn't uncommon for people to burn their money for light. Health-oriented convenience stores were spreading around the world while exclusively selling Intellectual Village vegetables. And yet that meant the prices were at thirty thousand yen for a bunch of grapes.

That was why I wasn't seeing anything of my parents or my grandparents who had supposedly retired. The Jinnai Brewery had primarily been served at classy restaurants in Gion or Askasaka, given as gifts at international summits, or provided as an offering at the Ise Shrine, but we'd been thrown into complete chaos with orders coming in from convenience stores, online stores, and discount stores.

The consumption had risen to abnormal levels.

In this age, everyone could buy Japan's finest sake as easily as a can of beer or a carton of juice.

"Our surefire money management technique is to take advantage of the rising yen by buying up the American dollar!!"

But the network had been built on the sacrifice of something else.

What was with the multiple credit rating agencies? Why were the lists of ratings so contradictory? I didn't know as much about money and economics as Madoka, but was that really possible? I mean, you could probably give a bit of an edge to your own country and its allies, but would you really rate it the opposite of the truth? Could you? And I'm not asking if you could punch the numbers into a mysterious calculator and get that answer. I'm asking if a list of nonsense numbers could really mess the world up like this.

A hole had opened somewhere in the giant bucket that was the world and that had created this unnatural situation. We were in one of the air pockets and thus benefitting from it, but not even we

understood it. We knew what was happening, but we did not know what the root cause was.

How was this any different from riding a plane that was leaking fuel?

Who could rest easy just because it was still airborne for the time being?

We didn't even know if the plane had been sent from our side of the ocean or the other side of the ocean. I felt that Japan and the rest of the air pockets that created the network were being manipulated, but what would the other people think when they saw all those celebrating people while their own bank accounts were rendered worthless and the company they had served for many long years broke off contact with them?

Gigantic conglomerates were dropping like flies and the international online shopping companies that had ruled the world's goods distribution were on life support. What had become of the Big 4 goes without saying. Major corporations with a proud history of traditions dating back over a century were bought up on a whim by startups run by middle or high schoolers. Even the defense industry was no exception despite its support by government and civilians alike. The people left standing in front of the ATM in stunned disbelief were seeing blizzards of money on TV.

They had no idea how it worked, but they continued gaining more and more money with their "magic trick" and irresponsibly carried around so much money their wallets were going to burst. The world was slowly headed toward disaster.

Her arrival brought fortune and her departure brought ruin.

That Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata lay happily next to me as my girlfriend.

But she still held the power of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.

"Will the IMF really respond to a conspiracy theory? After the unnatural rise of the yen during the ratings chaos, the Western nations are worried that Japanese investors were involved in the crash of the American dollar and the European euro. Are the joint military exercises in the Pacific and the South China Sea really a naval blockade meant to intimidate Japan?"

That was what had happened.

Japan had long since been sealed off by sea and by air.

There was more than one way to take advantage of the network.

As I already explained, they could gain citizenship in a country with more lax management and profit from within the network.

But there was another way.

Governments could force conspiracy theories onto the network as a means of redirecting their own citizen's anger toward them.

Japan was only 38% self-sufficient in food. Even if we began consuming all of the Intellectual Village vegetables domestically instead of using them to obtain foreign currency, that figure would only rise by at most 10%. Japan's population had risen to 150 million and various countries were applying intimidating pressure to starve out that increased population and fix this abnormal situation.

Japan had not been behind the rise of so many credit rating agencies, but we were the world's villain, we were the air pocket, we were the network.

Just the month before, hadn't we been looked down on as a country that could not stand on the world's center stage no matter how much money we had? And they thought we had put together this grand conspiracy?

The reckless creation of credit rating agencies once the other countries could not trust the American ones like Globe & Ingot or Gold Web had been something all of them began on their own.

The various air pockets that had arisen had only been a result of that.

And Japan had just been one of those.

We had been the convenient member of the network that everyone had looked down on as too lax.

We were like the color white at the center of a sheet displaying the three primary colors.

We were the unnatural hole of light in the middle.

When people heard some experts claiming this should not have happened based on how it had all started, they had begun to think there was more to this and that had led to the threats and intimidation.

This made them feel better.

If it had happened naturally, there was no way to fix it. It would be their own fault and they could not calm everyone's anger. That was why they had wanted a villain. They had wanted the dream of revealing an invisible system and returning everything to normal.

But there was nothing they could do.

Japan was only one part of the network and the network as a whole had had nothing to do with the initial cause. They may have taken advantage of the situation partway through, but it was the entire population of seven billion that had hit the economy's stop button.

The value of the bonds had risen on its own and someone tempted by all that money had come up with the magic trick. That had led to the entire network growing rich and Japan had just so happened to be one of those nations.

In truth, *the winners didn't care* what it was that had caused the simultaneous rise of so many credit rating agencies which had thrown the world economy into chaos.

They were not going to stop just because someone told them to.

For one thing, they did not know what they should stop doing or even what was happening.

Or at least, that was the case for 149,999,999 of them.

As her boyfriend, I was the sole exception.

No one knew which country would lose it and attack first. It was entirely possible a ballistic missile would fly in and blow away the capital. But no one knew how to solve the problem. Erasing the Japanese Archipelago from the map would not erase the problem. Nevertheless, they continued treating us like the source of all their problems and only placed more pressure on us.

And the daily partying only escalated as if everyone was trying their best to not face that strange fear head on.

There wasn't much else they could do, but that champagne tower of partying only brought even gloomier looks to the eyes of the other countries.

Definite ruin would eventually arrive from somewhere.

But whoever pulled the trigger, the black box created by the credit rating agency chaos would remain. After all, Youkai were immune to physical damage. She would not die even if nuclear missiles poured down like rain. In fact, the contaminated land would only make it harder to find her, so an age of unending starvation and thirst would begin and seven billion people's lives would come to an end.

This was what Majina, former leader of Hyakki Yakou, had most feared.

The Zashiki Warashi was out of control, the economy was in tatters, and the world would shrivel up and die.

The Zashiki Warashi in the red yukata with her Ver. 39 power was enough of a monster to cause trouble on this level while just sitting there.

I swear to you that she had no intent to destroy mankind.

In fact, she wasn't even aware she was actively harming people.

But…

That was exactly why there was no persuading her to stop despite being the original "unnatural cause". Since she didn't even know she was doing it, she could not consciously switch it off. Even if I explained it to her, she would probably tilt her head in confusion.

If some secret government organization or Hyakki Yakou realized what was going on, they might send in a large attack unit.

But not even that would work.

Majina had calculated it all out and realized that wouldn't work. That was why he had started his plan to turn the 150 million people of Japan into zombies, use the boosted power of the citizens to restrain the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi, and finish her off with Mei's stable Ver. 40 power.

There was no other way of restraining the Zashiki Warashi by force.

No matter what anyone tried to use – even a ton of NBC weapons – physical attacks were meaningless. Even if they tried to use the occult, some almost amusing coincidences would occur and devilish miracles would coincide to neutralize it all.

That was the Ver. 39.

That ruler of destiny was more unstable than Majina's completed Ver. 40, but that gave her the instantaneous maximum power needed to win.

She was a messenger of ruin that would reign supreme and remain unharmed even in a battle against seven billion people.

"…"

But Majina had said something else.

I had driven him back even though he was protected by the Ver. 40, so he had told me to watch as the world came to an end. And he had suggested I might have a power different from his.

I was the closest person to the world's ruin.

I was her boyfriend.

Did that mean I alone had some power that might stop the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi?

I looked down at the smartphone screen again.

I did not even need to check a news site. Every blog and banner ad was talking about the same thing. Every link led to word of the coming ruin.

"…Yukari."

"What is it, Shinobu?"

Her voice sounded like a tolerant older sister and like an ignorant little girl.

I placed an arm around her head and gently stroked the back of her head while I whispered into her ear.

“I will protect you. No matter what happens, I will always be on your side.”

I made that obvious announcement as I read the text on the smartphone.

It said the following:

“Is the world’s worst plan about to begin?

“All five standing member-nations have voted to censure the network made up of Japan and the six other air pockets. Experts say the result of this vote is extremely likely to influence all member-nations. If the vote in a regular session has the same result, it is possible the corresponding nations will be forcibly ejected from the UN in a truly unprecedented case.

“A forcible ejection from the UN means the erasure of all promises made in any war treaty exchanged using the UN.

“As the UN itself was meant to monitor and apply pressure to Japan, Germany, and Italy as the losers of World War Two, military commentators say this possible ejection will be especially meaningful and dangerous to Japan.

“If all war treaties based on the UN are abandoned, there is even a fear that those countries can be attacked without a declaration of war, strategic weapons such as nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons can be used against them with reckless abandon, their POWs can be tortured or slaughtered, and their public and private property can be seized via military intervention. Simply put, there is a possibility that all war crimes will become allowable.

“It depends on which country you ask, but some say they have already entered the coordinates for six of Japan’s major cities. If those foreign safety measures are removed, there is even a possibility of ballistic missiles immediately firing from the nuclear submarines blockading the ocean.

“The military is a massive source of employment and the weapons and ammunition they use can create a large amount of consumption. Some countries might be searching for a war not to defeat an enemy but to kick-start their own economy. Looking at it that way brings on a whole new kind of fear.”

I hadn’t even needed the impatient Nekomata to tell me anything.

Global ruin was already at seven billion people's throats, so this was no time to be averting my gaze.

This time between lovers had been something like creating fleeting memories as a farewell ritual.

I held the Zashiki Warashi's head close as I brought my finger to the screen and operated the smartphone.

I closed the browser filled with strange news, started up a photo album app, and focused on a picture I had seen not long before.

It was a drawing from when I was young.

It was drawn in crayon on construction paper.

The sun was red and the leaves were green. The perspective and colors were a complete mess.

There were humanoid figures drawn there. The one with red clothes and black hair was probably the Zashiki Warashi. Other figures looked more like animals. I had thought this was just a product of my imagination, but it really had happened. Some of them were scribbled out with black crayon and some I had no clue what they had originally been.

They formed a circle with smiles on their faces and some messy writing was positioned above their heads: We're All Friends.

"That's right."

I only had to say that once.

My recharging period was complete and naptime was over.

I recalled what I had to do.

Now, then.

Let's get the final battle started.

Shared Memory 1

There were a few things that the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata found truly surprising from the bottom of her heart.

For example, an event from the past. When Shinobu had been only as tall as her waist, he had once come home with bruises not just on his face, hands, or feet, but across his entire body.

“I won’t apologize,” he had said while clenching his teeth and squeezing the shoulder straps of his black backpack. “I won’t apologize to Miyano!!”

He had seemed to have gotten into a fight with a classmate. The standard course was for his father to come out, drop his fist on the boy’s head, show him pictures from the deep sea fish encyclopedia, and throw him in the dark shed, but this time Shinobu had refused to give in.

When his father had raised his fist, he had bitten the man’s arm. No matter how much the man had swung him around, the light of anger had not left Shinobu’s eyes. Shinobu’s mother had realized the normal methods were not going to work this time, so she had patiently gotten the whole story out of him and he had finally explained.

“I can’t forgive Miyano for what he said.”

“What was that?”

“That Nee-chan isn’t really part of my family since she’s a Youkai! That’s what he said!! I can’t forgive him even if he was joking!!”

“Oh.”

The Zashiki Warashi and Shinobu’s mother had exchanged bitter looks.

It had been well known within Noukotsu Village that a beautiful Zashiki Warashi lived in the Jinnai house. And with the exception of Shinobu and his childhood friend Nagisa, she had refused to show herself in front of the brats that made a fuss about seeing her out of pure curiosity.

The rest had been the standard fare.

Shinobu had seen nothing wrong with talking about how she would take baths with him and sleep in his futon, so the other boy must

have been jealous. It was a variant on how young boys would sometimes tease the girl they liked.

“I won’t forgive anyone who insults Nee-chan! I’ll protect her!!”

They understood the situation now, but they could not ignore the fact that he had raised a hand against his classmate. His grandfather had ultimately grabbed him by the collar and chucked him into the shed out front. The boy normally flailed around and made a fuss, but this time he had only puffed out his cheeks and accepted his punishment without speaking a word.

After locking the shed, his father had smiled bitterly at the boy’s behavior.

He had waved his hand around a little and looked down at the bite mark on his arm.

“That snot-nosed brat has got some fight in him now.”

“Of course he does. He’s your son and my grandson.”

Halfway through the night, as young Shinobu had leaned against the dusty shed’s wall with nothing to do, he had heard something moving. He had looked over and seen his overall small grandmother’s face poke out.

“Shinobu, Shinobu.”

“Oh, gramma! …Hm? How did you get in here?”

“I’ve learned a lot of secrets in my long life. But more importantly, you must be hungry. I made you some rice balls.”

“Sigh. Living a long life must be convenient. Nee-chan got in here sometime too!”

“Oh?”

His grandmother had looked down and seen the sleeping Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata curled up like a cat at the boy’s feet. He had stroked a hand through her long black hair.

“She was playing with me earlier, but she must have gotten tired.”

“Is that so? Then try not to wake her, Shinobu.”

His grandmother had smiled as she objectively analyzed the situation.

It had looked like the Youkai had snuck inside to comfort Shinobu, but it had probably been the exact opposite. Shinobu had gotten into a fight over her, so she had been worried that she had become a burden to him. She had likely come to ask him about it, realized there was nothing to worry about, and then relaxed in relief.

Simply put, she had the thought processes of a young girl despite having lived for centuries.

“Shinobu, you like salmon rice balls, don’t you? There are plenty of them, so eat up.”

“Huh? But should I really be eating rice balls when I’m being punished?”

“That male reasoning doesn’t matter. I think it would be much more shameful if you didn’t feel any anger when someone made fun of someone who lives with you.”

“Yeah!”

“But make no mistake. Your anger may have been right, but that doesn’t make up for hitting your friend. I used to be known as Wild Kaguya of the Inland Sea, but that was because I got that part wrong. Everyone feels pain if you hit them and that’s true for human and Youkai alike. It doesn’t matter if the wound is large or small. That doesn’t relieve the pain and fear they feel.”

“…”

Young Shinobu had given a troubled look with the triangular rice ball in both hands.

After some silence, he had lifted the rice ball to his mouth and spoken.

“I’ll go apologize to Miyano tomorrow morning.”

“Yes. You do that.”

His grandmother had rubbed his head and he had bitten into the rice ball with a huge smile on his face.

Then he had spoken to her again.

“But I wasn’t wrong. Nee-chan really is part of our family!”

“…”

“Gramma?”

“I’m sorry, Shinobu, but I’d sworn I wouldn’t lie to you. I just don’t like the idea of ‘kind lies’.”

It may have been the apologetic tone to her voice that had stabbed so sharply into his young heart. Rather than a glistening knife forcefully stabbing into him, it may have felt more like a plastic straw pressed against the center of his chest until it pierced through.

His face had visibly clouded over, but his grandmother had continued with a smile.

“Shinobu? Do you think the two of us are family?”

“What are you talking about? Of course we are!”

“I see. Thank you. But the thing is, I wasn’t part of the Jinnai family when I was born. Do you remember your aunt’s house in Setouchi? That’s where you had so much fun after seeing the ocean for the first time. The truth is, that was where I was born.”

“Hm? Hmm???”

“Ha ha ha. In other words, even if you aren’t family to begin with, there’s a way to become family.”

“What’s that? How do you do it?”

She had rubbed his head and answered his innocent question.

“It’s simple. If you and the Zashiki Warashi get married, no one can say you aren’t family.”

After eating so many rice balls, Shinobu had been overcome by sleepiness too. His well-prepared grandmother had held out a bottle of water and his tooth brush, so he had brushed his teeth, wrapped his arms around the Zashiki Warashi who had gone to sleep ahead of time in accordance with her “usual habit”, and drifted off to sleep.

Finally, after Shinobu had set sail for the world of dreams and his

grandmother had left the shed, the Zashiki Warashi in the red yukata had lifted her eyelids just a little. She had gently wrapped her arms around young Shinobu and breathed a quiet sigh as she thought back on the previous conversation.

Finally, she had spoken a few words.

“Honestly. You didn’t need to tell him that.”

Chapter 2: Colorless Prequel@Uchimaku Hayabusa

Part 1

I, Uchimaku Hayabusa, was on a mission to take responsibility for my own words. Namely, I was visiting a giant amusement park that made use of the “Tokyo” image despite actually existing a little bit outside the city.

“Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha!! Hey, detective, where should we go next, what should we ride next, what should we do next!? Oh, the swing-by coaster’s congestion level is at green! We can ride right away if we go now, detective!!”

The park was brightly illuminated for night and I was sitting exhausted on a bench, but I felt a tug on the side of my coat. The tug came from a twintailed middle school girl who was also shoving a smartphone into my face to show me the official park map app. As for her outfit…I couldn’t even call this one a swimsuit. She had a red ribbon about as thick as two fingers wrapped around her body. On top of that, she wore a wafer-style checked ribbon tie, a whipped cream white coat, and a chocolate brown miniskirt. With the shortcake-like hat pretty much hanging on the side of her head, the overall concept seemed to be a wedding cake. She also had something like a sword hanging at her waist, but it may have been an LED light modeled after a wedding’s candle lighting. To be blunt, it was insane in more ways than one.

“We’ve already ridden the coaster twelve times today… We’ve been here since morning, so we’ve gone on all the rides about three times now. The young women running the rides recognize us now.”

“Huh? Why are you all limp, detective?”

“What happened to the girl who got out of breath just running up some stairs? It isn’t normal to outdo a professional police detective in a competition of stamina.”

Was this a relative of that medically baseless claim that snacks went

in a different stomach?

…Now, why were we here? It was a lingering effect of the zombie outbreak from the month before.

I had carelessly said I would go on an amusement park date with her if we escaped that hell.

“Fine then. I guess I need to start acting more soothing to help you with your exhaustion. It isn’t long until the night illumination parade, so is there anything we can use to kill some time?”

“You’re still not done riding things!?”

“Shut up. I have your word on this. Oh, the Ferris wheel is open! This is our chance, detective! C’mon, get up and run!!”

And thus I was dragged through the park by the Mystery Freak.

There were still a few people in line for the Ferris wheel, but it did feel like a miracle given how congested the amusement park was. If you bought a fairly expensive free pass, you could enter through a special gate and skip the line onto the Ferris wheel, but it had become entirely meaningless now that everyone had one of those priority passes.

I bought a drink from the part-time girl who approached the line and we waited our turn. I didn’t know if it was the standard price in amusement parks or if it was due to the recent bourgeois boom, but a single paper cup was ridiculously expensive.

Enbi also handed several bills to the girl.

Just a month before, that sight would have been truly shocking.

“How can you buy ice cream in December? And while I’m at it, there has to be something wrong with you to wear that swimsuit… no, that red ribbon with only a miniskirt and coat colored like chocolate or whipped cream on top.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Make sure you call it a rice milk gelato. This is brand-name rice, you know?”

Rice milk, huh?

A diet of avoiding carbonated drinks to lose weight had been popular recently, but it had completely died out.

There was a simple reason for that: everyone retained their memories of the zombie outbreak.

People had bitten other people and devoured their flesh and blood. I had been a part of it, but my police lifestyle had given me the resistance needed to overcome that kind of gloomy experience. The Mystery Freak was the same, but the majority of people were not. Those who had actually become zombies were of course scarred by the experience, but it had apparently caused quite a commotion even among the people who had only heard about it. Even with the strange financial situation recently, the meat industry had lost a ton of money. Some people had stopped eating meat altogether and others could not even stand cheese or butter. Of course, sticking to complete vegetarianism would be incredibly difficult, so I expected the consumption of meat to recover after a bit.

“Personally, I can’t believe you would drink hot coffee, detective.”

“?”

“This is an amusement park during the on-season, so don’t you think the pay bathrooms are going to be the busiest part of the park? Don’t blame me when drinking that comes back to bite you.”

Before long, it was our turn.

The young woman in charge guided us into the open door of the gondola.

As soon as the door closed and locked, Enbi grinned at me from the opposite seat.

“Now then, detective.”

“Let’s enjoy the scenery.”

“Now, now! We’re inside a locked room together! No one can stop this long ride for the next twenty five minutes!! You know what that means, don’t you? Your heart had better be pounding, dammit!!”

“Stop it, you moron! When it comes to you and locked rooms, I’m more afraid of someone ending up dead!!”

A struggle ensued. I managed to hold off the approaching love monster for a while. I was afraid some kind of safety feature would

kick in and stop the Ferris wheel, but it must not have been that fragile.

“Detective.”

At some point, Enbi had ended up sitting next to me instead of across from me.

“You asked before why I would buy ice cream in December. To be honest, it wasn’t easy eating that in this weather.”

“See? I was right.”

“But I had a good reason to choose something vanilla flavored.”

“…”

“I mean, if I set up the perfect mood, shut my eyes, and gently puckered my lips, wouldn’t it be awful if it ended up tasting like my hamburger’s barbecue sauce? It would seem too real and wake us up from the dream!! That’s why I made sure that this middle school girl’s lips have a vanilla scent. So what do you have to say about that ideal, detective?”

“Hold on.”

“So hurry up and grab my shoulders and kiss me! I’m perfectly okay with you going in to find out what my tongue tastes like too!! And I think coffee-flavored lips fits your image perfectly! Kyah☆ I can’t hold back any longer, so let’s create a coffee float flavor together! If you aren’t going to make the move, then I’ll have to! Muchuu!!”

“What happened to the qualifier that this had to remain wholesome!?”

Enbi was using both hands to mimic an octopus, so I grabbed her face with both hands and just barely managed to push her away.

Nothing untoward had happened, but a man and a girl were covered in sweat and gasping for breath inside a small room.

But even if someone misinterpreted the situation, there was no danger of a uniformed police officer running in with a monstrous look on his face and a baton in one hand.

A distant look filled my eyes.

This was why I had been able to spend an entire workday at an amusement park with the Mystery Freak despite all my pay cuts and the fact that I had no time off left.

The news kept saying Japan had entered an unprecedented (and eerily unexplainable) period of massive consumption and gluttony, but the real story was nowhere near as happy.

When it came down to it, public servants were just employees. They wouldn't work without getting paid.

Since Globe & Ingot, Triple Roses, and all those other credit rating agencies were causing unpredictable daily fluctuations in the value of the Japanese yen, the government could not judge anything's value properly and could not calculate out any kind of budget. Since they didn't know the value of a single yen, they could not even find the answer to 1 + 1. In all seriousness, if they decided one week that a project needed one hundred million yen, the necessary amount could grow to fifty or even one hundred times as much using the value of the yen a week later. Whatever the cause, an organization could not function if the accountants raised the white flag and failed to come up with a budget. Not enough was of course a problem, but too much created suspicions of slush funds or mismanagement.

It might be hard to understand for those of us who live in the world of the yen and use the yen for everything, but major corporations that work hard at exporting and importing and government bureaucrats who focus on the foreign exchange market were about ready to faint. And if those at the top could not act, then the local offices would never get the stamp of approval when they requested a budget.

You could say Japan's administrative and executive agencies had all shut their doors and gone on vacation.

It was a strange situation where no one could do anything despite all the money they were making.

The general public had not been told, but the police were no exception.

In other words, I had not taken time off. I had gone into the office, but the police department had been locked up and I couldn't get in.

Some of the uniformed officers in the police boxes were voluntarily

going on patrols, but how long would that last? Without getting paid, they couldn't eat and they would be forced to spend some of their time finding another source of money. Plus, public servants were barred from having a second job, so they would be forced to choose between one and the other. No one could stick with the idealistic answer forever.

"There."

Enbi must not have liked that I was lost in thought because she moved from her spot next to me.

That is, she placed her small butt on my lap and leaned all her weight back on me.

"What are you doing, Mystery Freak?"

"What's wrong with this? Isn't it all so pretty! It was nice when we rode it during the day, but it's completely different at night!! It's like a carpet of stars."

Enbi used me as her chair and kicked her legs around.

Her words drew my eye out the window.

The view of the night had to be quite different from what we would have seen just a week before. Everything was unnecessarily bright as if to show off all the money that was filling every nook and cranny of the city. Bonds only earned interest every six months or every year, but there must have been some magic trick to earning a fortune must faster than that. It was December, so a lot of houses were decorated like they were Christmas trees themselves.

Who could say how much that kind of thing actually cost, but no one batted an eye at loans that would take decades to pay back. Money was flying around like a blizzard and everyone just wanted to enjoy the present.

But didn't that make it all feel somehow ominous?

This unnatural state of affluence would not continue forever. It was just like a scene in a comedy film where someone walks off a cliff while blindfolded. Everyone was walking out over empty air at the moment. This would not last forever. If they continued thoughtlessly floating up there, every last light in this nightscape would crash down to the bottom of the cliff.

“Oh, look over there, detective. Looks like they’re already preparing for the night illumination parade. That’s a little ahead of schedule.”

“How long until ‘today’ ends, dammit?”

“Ah ha ha! Don’t worry, don’t worry. I made sure to reserve us a room at the park hotel. We can go right to bed after the parade’s over. Tomorrow should be fun too. In fact, tonight should be lots of fun☆”

“……
What did you just say?”

I nearly choked.

It was true the amusement park had a luxury hotel run by the same brand. I could see it from the Ferris wheel. Its wall had become a giant screen, presumably using projection mapping to work around the uneven surface.

But that wasn’t the issue.

I gave the Mystery Freak a look that said “you understand, don’t you?” and she twisted around on my lap to look at me and nod.

“Eh? Oh, c’mon. Don’t look so worried. It’ll all be fine. I of course reserved a single room with a double bed.”

“That wasn’t what I meant! And a double bed only makes it worse!! And how did a middle school girl reserve a room like that!? That hotel is dangerous!!”

“Everyone holds the power of money thanks to the unprecedented bond magic. The hotel is receiving so many requests they can’t do a detailed check on each and every one.”

That was probably why no one had taken issue with a man in a suit and coat walking around an amusement park with a middle school girl in a swimsuit…no, with a ribbon wrapped around her body and a coat and miniskirt that didn’t do much to help. The police and the rest of the government had shut their doors, so I could only pray there weren’t any actual moral hazards popping up.

“Regardless, that isn’t happening! You never said anything about a hotel and I only promised to go on a single amusement park date with you if we escaped that zombie outbreak. Just one! That doesn’t give you a second day!!”

“Eh? But doesn’t it count as just the once as long as we don’t leave the park?”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning to confine me here and live in the hotel!”

“Hm? Wait… That’s not a bad idea.”

“Oh, no. Now I’m giving you ideas? But anyway, we can’t do that!!”

“But detective, won’t you be in trouble without the hotel?”

“Why? The last train hasn’t left yet.”

“But.”

The twintail girl raised a finger while relaxing on my lap.

“Do you have the money needed to ride the train?”

Huh?

Don’t tell me!

“It’s gone, dammit! My wallet is gone! Mystery Freak, when did you take it!?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Grin, grin. Not a single clue. Smirk, smirk.”

“I bought that hot coffee just before boarding the Ferris wheel, so it had to be after that. It must have been after we got in here. But where is it? And when did you take it?”

“See? Without any change or your IC card, there’s nothing you can do. Even if we’re just a little out of Tokyo, it’ll be tough getting back to your apartment in Ochanomizu on foot. Right, right?”

“…”

“Oh, or…”

She smiled.

While sitting on my lap, the Mystery Freak lifted her head to look back at me. She looked me in the eye with her head upside-down to mine and tried to provoke me.

“Do you have the courage to feel up my body to find your lost wallet in this ribbon, coat, or miniskirt?”

“I can’t believe you!!”

“Wahyah!? I didn’t think you’d actually stick your hand in there! Now my heart’s pounding! Ah ha ha! That tickles! Nya ha ha ha

ha!!”

I would rather not describe this in much detail, but it was necessary for my search. Let’s just say I somehow managed to get my wallet back after a hard struggle.

And it frightens me that she would hide it there of all places…

“Tch. I thought I could get you to pay for the answer with a kiss. I certainly didn’t expect for you to go the brute force route right off the bat. Detective, when you play room escape games, are you the kind of person that ignores the code in the hint and just goes through every option on the dial?”

She pouted her lips, but she still seemed to be enjoying herself.

As she sat in my lap and had me hold her in my arms from behind, she suddenly spoke up.

“To be honest, I didn’t think it would turn out like this.”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta say I’m pretty surprised to find myself on an amusement park date with a middle school girl.”

“C’mon, I didn’t mean that.”

She cutely kicked her legs.

“*I wasn’t actually serious.*”

A strange silence fell over the Ferris wheel.

That had been a decisive statement, even if it was something I had already known.

“Oh, but I wasn’t deceiving you or anything. Hishigami Enbi really did love Uchimaku Hayabusa. But it was just like a preschooler saying he’s going to marry his teacher. I didn’t think it could ever actually happen. No matter how serious I was, I thought you’d just humor me and rub my head and that would be the end of it. It’s like having your feelings of love dismissed as fake as soon as you confess, but you still don’t want to lie to the person you love and you don’t really mind. That was all it was. No, that was all it should have been.”

“Wait, why did you just correct yourself?”

“But why is it? Since I knew it would never work out, I used you as practice and sent my best shots your way, but then everything seemed to change. That wall began to wobble. I mean, c’mon. If you do that, I’ll start to get serious. Once you tell me I can actually knock over the wall, I’m gonna tackle it with everything I’ve got, break it down, and keep going!! To think we’d go from a zombie outbreak to an amusement park date! I can’t believe this! Oh, I can’t stop blushing!!”

“I’m not sure I get this, but why do I feel like you’re going to ignore the rules and send in a marriage registration form for us? Also it has not changed! Everything has not changed! This is only a ceremony to purify myself after letting my careless feelings and the mood get the better of me during those extreme circumstances!!”

The Mystery Freak leaned back against me.

That seemed to be her way of telling me to pipe down.

“It has changed,” she said.

“What has? And where?”

“The Glass House. That awful case where we first met. Compare us to back then and we’ve changed more than 3.5 billion years of evolution.”

“…”

For an instant, I thought Enbi’s reflection in the window had changed to that girl who had felt like a worn-down rusty blade.

I shook my head to clear away the sentimental hallucination and spoke to the girl on my lap.

“That’s not fair.”

“This is a struggle between a girl and a guy. When the guy I’ve fallen for is on the verge of wavering, I’m gonna use whatever I can.”

She giggled and pressed her head against me so I could smell her hair.

“Do you remember all that properly? How about we have a bit of a review?”

“You sound like a woman on her anniversary grilling her husband about where they went on their first date.”

“Bwefh!! N-now you’re the one getting ahead of yourself here!!”

She choked a little, but then began her questioning while kicking her feet.

“The Glass House was an eerie mansion built on a privately-owned mountain not too far from the city. Now, what was that mansion’s most notable feature?”

“All the inner walls, floors, ceilings, and doors were made of transparent reinforced glass. That insane space of zero privacy was a physical representation of the family’s insistence that there were no secrets between family. So what was their occupation?”

It had turned into a quiz tournament for some reason.

The Mystery Freak readily answered as if it had happened just yesterday.

“Fortune telling with a specialization in major clients such as politicians and corporation executives. That’s why they were so picky about the truth and secrets. Okay, detective, how many people ultimately died in that case?”

“Three. One was the planned locked room murder, one was an irregular death of someone who had found some evidence, and the third was disguised as a suicide to frame them. Mystery Freak, who was the murderer?”

“The family’s young wife. And the murder weapon?”

“A crossbow. But the bolt was sometimes fired from the crossbow and sometimes held and stabbed into the victim. Let’s see… Who was the butler with the seemingly meaningful bandages over his face?”

“A normal butler whose wound had long since healed but mistakenly believed everyone was treating him nicely because of it. How many shower scenes were there with the maid?”

“Six. …No, one was the young wife and one was that girl in the wheelchair, so I guess only four.”

“Why do you remember that so accurately!?”

“Isn’t that the point of this quiz!?”

We took a short break.

Afterwards, the Mystery Freak continued for us.

“Pant, pant. So what was the trick behind the first murder? All the walls were transparent, so everyone should have been able to see it happen.”

“The position of the furniture in each room. Each one was only a lamp or dresser, but altogether they created a perfect wall. By placing a piece of that wall in each room between the living room and the murder room, she hid the scene behind a special blind. Now, what was the young wife’s motive?”

“She was a second wife and did not fit into the family very well. As fortune tellers, the family was vehemently opposed to secrets and tried to bring everyone together like that. Now, now. The real question: how did your Enbi-chan solve it all?”

“Well…”

I looked up at the ceiling with the Mystery Freak on my lap.

This had happened after the murderer had shot me in the side with the crossbow.

“You were so pissed you destroyed the entire Glass House. The young wife was caught in a shower of glass and was nearly killed, scarily enough.”

“And that’s when my love was born! Oh, I really can’t stop blushing! Ah!!”

Her small butt rose up from my lap.

Something that left me unsure where to look appeared right in front of my face, but the Mystery Freak did not seem to mind. In fact, it might have been on purpose. At any rate, she was looking out the window.

“There’s an orange-glowing carriage in the night illumination parade they’re getting ready… It looks like we’re getting that rare float that’s rumored to only appear once every ten times! If two

people take a photo together with that in the background, they're supposed to fall in love!!"

"If they're in a position to be taking a photo together at an amusement park at night, aren't they probably already in love?"

"Eh heh. So you admit it? You just confessed to your crime, detective!!"

"Please don't phrase it like that, you idiot!!"

Enbi plopped her butt back down onto its usual spot. She sat in my lap and kicked her feet around while speaking shrilly about what she saw out the window.

I thought to myself as I gently reached around her from behind as if playing the role of her seatbelt.

This country looked happy at first glance, but it was actually…no, the entire world was actually in a dangerous situation. The Mystery Freak had to have noticed that. She wasn't stupid enough to be utterly oblivious. She had simply chosen to enjoy herself up until the very end.

That was the choice of a dreaming girl.

But she had to know the truth.

This would not last long. This crazy situation where no one knew why they were so happy could not last. It was like a passenger plane continuing to fly without the pilot. No matter how comfortable it was, you couldn't just enjoy it forever. Once the weather worsened and you hit some turbulence or once the warning light next to the fuel meter came on, it was all over.

After the Ferris wheel finished is twenty five minute circuit, we returned to the surface.

"What should we do? Stick up a 'we're busy' sign and enjoy another circuit?"

"I don't think that's an option."

With that said, I lowered her small body from my lap.

She looked dissatisfied, but I opened the door from within.

I found a familiar face there.

His suit and coat were similar to mine, but he was fundamentally different. That rich black-haired bachelor made me wonder just how one acquired that kind of style.

It was Chief Superintendent Mishima.

“Hi, Uchimaku-kun. If you still have some sense of societal duty left inside you, could we maybe talk about work?”

Our living dream was over.

Now, it’s time for that mental exercise you love so much, Mystery Freak.

Let’s try thinking about global ruin.

Part 2

Countless LED lightbulbs decorated the rollercoaster rails and Ferris wheel frame, the people waved penlights and glow sticks, and projection mapping displayed dancing fairies and eyepatch-wearing witches on the entire outer walls of the luxury hotel and haunted mansion.

Within those symbols of an age of gluttony and great consumption, we spoke at one of the park’s outside restaurants.

It was me, the Mystery Freak, and Chief Superintendent Mishima.

Also, Mishima-san had invited a woman I didn’t know. She had semi-long black hair and looked about college aged. I had no room to talk when I was walking around with a middle school girl on a weekday night, but I could not imagine how Mishima-san, in his late thirties, knew this woman. With her intellectual glasses and chic tablet, she would have looked like a secretary if only she was a little older.

However, that impression was ruined by her blue clothing which looked like something a marching band would wear. The leggings and miniskirt looked horribly out of place. It was Christmas and this

was an amusement park, so I had to wonder if they were having some kind of costume campaign.

Mishima-san introduced her.

“This is Kotemitsu Seika-san. She is apparently the main family’s #1 troubleshooter. By the way, Uchimaku-kun, how much do you know about the main Kotemitsu family?”

“Kotemitsu…?”

I wasn’t sure what he meant.

I could only think of one Kotemitsu I knew.

“I think that high school girl with my nephew Shinobu back in Zenmetsu Village had that family name.”

“She’s the joker.”

Seika-san(?) cut in with a calm look on her face. She really did not suit that active marching band outfit.

“It is true that Kotemitsu has been a major name in the financial world since the old zaibatsu days, but our goal is not to amass a personal fortune. We serve the country by continually intervening in the ever-changing financial, exchange, and bond markets to keep the brand-name of the Japanese yen at a high level. That is the true desire of the Kotemitsu family. …But that girl has escaped the bonds of our family and seeks a personal fortune. Losing control of the #4 is an embarrassment to us all.”

“Now, now, Seika-san. That’s enough about Madoka-chan. We have a bigger problem.”

Mishima-san gently stopped her and Seika-san cleared her throat.

Then she faced me again.

“Due to the contradictory lists from multiple credit rating agencies, no one knows what the world’s bonds are worth, but Japan is one of the few air pockets that have escaped that fate. That has supposedly allowed us to preserve our high value and construct the so-called network, but that is all a complete lie.”

She stuck her tongue out like a child.

“Normally, the Japanese bonds and currency would have been swallowed up by that black box as well. And their value would have fallen to the level of scrap paper.”

“What do you mean?”

I was confused and Seika-san was the one to answer.

“One: Japan has plenty of liquid materials beyond the bonds and exchange market, so it can persist for a while even if the yen itself were to crash. For example, the Intellectual Village ultra-high quality brand-name vegetables and handicrafts made by living national treasures. Two: the main Kotemitsu family has used methods I must not repeat to maintain the value of the Japanese yen. Although most of those are little more than financial magic tricks that work like anesthetic to distribute the pain more evenly. And three: ‘the truly powerful’ are afraid of losing their fortunes, so they are defending the air pockets anyway they can to create a temporary location for their assets. Those are the three pillars supporting this unnatural situation.”

It sounded complicated, but it wasn’t that bad.

You just had to reduce it down to the main point.

“Hey, one of those pillars is much thicker than the others, isn’t it?” asked the Mystery Freak.

“Yes. The third one is far more important. For one thing, Japan… and all of the air pockets have maintained their value because none of the many foreign credit rating agencies happened to view them as important and they were rated neither high nor low. They received similar ratings from enough of the agencies to avoid the chaos. …However, that is odd.”

“Oh, I get it. The other nations are blockading us by sea and claiming it’s a joint military exercise. They think this situation has to be manmade, so they’re telling Japan to deal with it because we look like the easiest target of the network nations. But if they want to reduce Japan’s value, it should be easy. The foreign credit rating agencies just have to change the rating of our bonds.”

“And that means someone’s interfering with that.” Mishima-san shrugged. “Those powerful people have entrusted their fortunes to Japanese bonds and the yen…no, they’ve divided it up between all the network’s air pockets. But they’re foreigners. They just want to

protect their fortunes, so they have no real reason to care about the country of Japan. After all, it's just one air pocket and they don't have all their fortune there. If the credit rating agencies bring this to a stop on some kind of a whim, then this nation will break through the thin ice and fall into the icy depths below. They would lose some money then, but only a little. They would only lose one piece of the many they've spread around. It wouldn't be enough to hang themselves over."

"Are there hints that that's happening?"

"If not, they wouldn't be blocking off the sea routes with their supposed joint military exercise," smoothly replied Kotemitsu Seika-san. "If they just wanted to preserve their hidden assets, they wouldn't do that. They're having trouble restraining the anger of the people in their own countries. And if they do too much to protect just the one hidden safe, they risk being burnt at the stake by the people who have had their safes continually taken away. I don't know which way the scales will tip. The switch could be thrown at any time. They care about their money, but it isn't known if they're willing to sacrifice their positions in their own countries or their lives for it. Especially when we're only talking about a secret stash of money, not their entire fortune."

Mishima-san continued from there.

"And Uchimaku-kun, you've caught wind of the ominous atmosphere around here, haven't you? The government offices and administrative agencies have shut their doors because they can't distribute their budgets? And only the Ministry of Defense and JSDF are still running on volunteers for fear of riots? Utter nonsense. That just means the Ministry of Defense is running the entire government right now, doesn't it? That just means they're finding a way around using the taboo term 'martial law', doesn't it? The Ministry of Defense is on edge with that coalition force's naval blockade and who knows what kind of *ultra vires* actions they're going to justify using that. You're here because you'd figured that out, right? You wanted to move a bit away from Tokyo but stay close enough that you could run back if need be. You wanted to be a bit outside the chain of command so you could ignore any suspicious orders you got from the metropolitan police department, didn't you?"

"…"

The atmosphere was horribly strained.

If what Mishima-san was saying and what was swirling through my mind was accurate, this had gone beyond a mere “incident” and become a “disaster”. A single powerless police detective could do nothing about this. It would hardly be surprising if the term “civil war” came up when discussing a solution.

But after saying all that, Mishima-san easily changed the subject.

“But despite all that, let’s set it aside. The real problem is something else.”

“Wha-…ehh!?”

“Ah hah hah! I guess you would be surprised. But the JSDF isn’t going to do anything rash. They’re professionals, so they understand. If they do go on a rampage and enter into a real battle, Japan will dry up in no time at all. Even if they gather up all the fuel and ammunition reserves in the country, Japan can’t even wage war for three months on its own. Or rather, we were made that way to defang us. Everything the Ministry of Defense is doing is a bluff. It’s an obvious painkiller meant to keep true social unrest from running rampant.”

Then what was the real problem?

What were they trying to avoid looking at by creating this tense mood bordering on martial law?

“This is the other problem.”

Seika-san held her tablet out over the table.

It displayed some cheerful news about the constant days and nights of merrymaking.

“Will the natural convenience stores finally expand to the entire nation? As the Japanese people grow ever more health-conscious, luxury stores stocking Intellectual Village products will now be opening nationwide. The major convenience store chain Next Store Holdings has made it official. The ultra-high quality brand-name vegetables previously found at luxury restaurants and seen as a means of gathering foreign currency will now be much closer to home.”

The article sounded like a bad joke.

I couldn't understand how anyone could look at it with a smile.

"A bunch of grapes costs thirty thousand yen and junmai daiginjo can go for several million. …This means there are more and more people with the kind of money to buy those things at a convenience store."

"But wait a second. This means…!"

"Yes. This elated period of mass consumption is but a dream. It will eventually burst and vanish. It doesn't matter if Japan bursts or if another air pocket does and the crash spreads across the network. Either way, it will end eventually. We should be working to reduce the damage when that happens, but they're heading in the exact opposite direction. They've crossed the final line and utterly lost their financial senses. If these natural convenience stores really do open up across the country and everyone starts buying ingredients that cost millions of yen, the coming crash will shake the nation far more than the bursting of any previous bubble. The country really will collapse and be unable to recover."

It was like getting a great crowd to cross a metal bridge and telling them it was safe and sturdy while you actually pulled out the girders supporting it.

They of course did not care what happened to the people walking above.

I heard some crazed shouts and saw a camera flash a short distance away.

A group that looked college aged was throwing a ton of paper money overhead and posing in front of a smartphone on a selfie stick. They were likely making material for a blog or video site.

They didn't care that the wind was blowing the money away.

Nor did the people watching them in annoyance.

The money danced through the air like cherry blossom petals at night while illuminated by the bright light of the projection mapping.

"They didn't actually earn most of that money. It came from the

magic trick of making repeated deals between the network nations' bonds to increase their rarity and then selling them 'outside' in personal transactions. In other words, it's all for show. That's the scariest thing of all. They think they can make the same amount next year, so they buy everything they want, go into debt, and take out loans, all while thinking they'll be just fine. …Sorry, but once the dream bursts, only the debt will remain. A bunch of grapes costs thirty thousand yen and a small carton of sake to take home costs a million yen. Once they get used to that, I don't even want to imagine what they'll think of as splurging or what kind of prior investments they'll make."

"And conveniently, the Next Store Holdings that's opening those natural convenience stores looks like a domestic group at first, but they've invited in so many foreign executives that the top management is filled with foreign thinking. You could call it a foreign-owned domestic company."

"You mean foreigners are destroying our financial senses to defeat the country without firing a single shell?"

The Mystery Freak frowned and Mishima-san shrugged.

"I'm not so sure. It is true the truly powerful are involved in this, but I don't know what they're after. They might be trying to destroy the financial senses of the Japanese people to harm us, but they also might just be trying to make money off of the Japanese era of overconsumption. …But either way, this country is doomed if we don't do anything."

"If it's that dangerous, why not prevent the stores from opening?"

"On what authority? Their products aren't dangerous and the prices are 'appropriate' since they're products of Intellectual Villages. There's no real problem there. This isn't a dictatorship that imprisons people for dangerous ideologies. Preventing over two hundred stores from opening over a formless conspiracy theory would be a rebellion against capitalism. Most importantly, all the administrative agencies are closed, remember? The district courts aren't functioning."

I thought that might be what the Ministry of Defense was reacting to, but was it not?

The hidden side of the hidden side was the non-hidden side

Did the NPA and the metropolitan police department really just not have the funding they needed to keep going?

If so, that was bad in and of itself!

“But Uchimaku-kun, that isn’t the biggest problem,” said Mishima-san. “The naval blockade and the natural convenience stores are only side issues. Why did this happen in the first place? Multiple credit rating agencies appeared and created contradictory lists. Why did all of mankind suddenly decide to commit mass suicide? The world looks so bright, but it’s fallen into bottomless poverty. Everyone has their issues with this situation and they could just throw out the confusing lists and refuse to trust them, but even though we all want to reject the coming destruction of the world, we can’t stop focusing on it, like it was written in a book of prophecy. What caused this unnatural mental state? If we don’t do something about that, we can’t fundamentally solve this.”

I understood that.

But what did that have to do with us?

There was no conspiracy of the Ministry of Defense. We couldn’t stop the natural convenience stores from opening nationwide. Then what did he hope I could do as a single man in a suit without even an office to go into?

How much did Mishima-san and Seika-san know?

“You don’t understand a thing, do you? Honestly, and you call yourself the #1 troubleshooter?”

Suddenly, a girl cut in with utter scorn in her voice.

Enbi turned toward it and spoke up in slight surprise.

“Oh, if it isn’t Madoka.”

“And if it isn’t Enbi.”

It was the high school girl I had seen at Zenmetsu Village. She wore a white dress so thin I would have been able to see her body’s silhouette if she was lit from behind and she wore a thick coat over that.

“What brings you here? It isn’t often that you return to the big city

and all its exhaust. It was just the other day that you came crying to me over the phone, saying a hole had opened in your chest and, by the time you realized it was your first love, it was already over."

"Oh, um, we can discuss that later. Also, the royal suite in the hotel here is my personal room. Instead of renting it out for years at a time, they gave me a room as an unofficial way of welcoming me as a major shareholder. …Anyway, knowing Shinobu-kun, there has to be something beyond his happy ending. I doubt he can overcome the obstacle of unfaithfulness, so that means I still have a chance. Mutter mutter…"

Seika-san had remained calm and collected this entire time, but a murderous aura surrounded her now.

"You useless joker…"

"Yes, yes. You stay quiet in your corner there, you convenient ace of hearts. Who would ever be afraid of someone who can only do what they're told, even if it's done perfectly? I guess the #1 who had her hands full seeing how that old mainframe lady would react couldn't help but envy the out-of-control #4 who left the main family to live on her own. Right?"

"Me? Envy you?"

"Ohh? Was I wrong? Then are you still bothered that my personal financial techniques made short work of all the main family's attack servers so you had to turn tail and flee from our financial battle? Unless you want to file for bankruptcy, then get lost, *semi-pro*."

Madoka(…-chan?) laughed mockingly at Seika-san in her cheerful marching band outfit and then she continued speaking.

"When investing, you always preferred to have your opponent mess up than to take the fight to them. I'm guessing that bigshot from the police is taking the leading role here. And he's investigated every single idea he could think of, found no hole in the bottom of the bucket, tilted his head, and finally, in the very end, decided to rely on Enbi and the detective there."

"I'm not really sure what to say," said Mishima-san.

"After all, there was that incident in the northern Fuuka Village. Enbi, that detective, and I all saw it there. *That incident involved a mysterious organization known a Hyakki Yakou and a special Zashiki*

Warashi they highly prized. And wasn't the other group behind it the riot police? That means you would have heard about the result there and you would have realized this is the only possibility left."

The Zashiki Warashi.

A Youkai of fortune and destruction.

And this one in particular had clearly been modified by Hyakki Yakou.

Could it be?

But…no…could it…!?

"Madoka-chan."

Mishima-san asked a searching question.

He had a gentle look in his eyes, but those eyes could easily pierce through the girl if he saw anything dangerous.

"Are you saying you have some useful information in your position outside of Kotemitsu?"

"No. Unlike that obedient woman, I'm honest."

Madoka-chan ignored the sound of clenching teeth and smoothly continued.

"But I did hear one thing from Shinobu-kun. That lady-killer has the nerve to give me a look of 100% pure trust despite going off and having all sorts of lovey-dovey fun."

"What exactly did he say?"

It was a simple question.

The answer was also simple.

"He said he's the closest person to the black box. And he asked that any outsiders don't get involved."

Shared Memory 2

She was fairly sure it had happened when Shinobu was around ten.

On that day, the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata had noticed a change in young Shinobu's behavior after he returned from school and played with her in the Buddhist altar room.

Technically, she did not actually know when the change had happened.

But on that day, she had intentionally taken a certain action and had received the reaction she had been expecting.

To clear away her worries, she had asked a question as they played a foreign trading card game (it was popular due to the cool artwork but no one in his class had the courage to put together a deck of only girl cards.)

"Shinobu."

"What is it, Nee-chan?"

"I've been wondering. Why are you refusing to look me in the eye?"

His shoulders had jumped.

He had looked down at his fanned-out cards and tried to sound calm as he answered her.

"I'm not."

"Hm?"

"I said I'm not."

"Mhhh???"

She had peered at him from below to look him in the eye by force, but his gaze had escaped to the side. She had circled around in pursuit, but he had escaped in the opposite direction. After the process had repeated a few times, he must have run out of places to escape to because he had looked to the ceiling and collapsed onto his back.

When she had rested his head on her lap and looked down from above to finally look him in the eye, he had given up and opened his mouth.

“It isn’t that I don’t like you.”

“I can tell that.”

“It’s just, um, nnn… Looking you in the eye is…e-embarrassing!”

“Eh?”

“Heat gathers in my head and I blush and I can’t think. I don’t get it myself, but it isn’t normal. The only way to calm down is to shut you out of my mind!!”

“…”

“But why is it? Even when you’re not there, like when I’m writing about you for an essay at school, I blush. Once it starts, I can’t stop it, so it’s kind of a problem.”

“Shiiinobuuu.”

His mother had called for him, so he had gotten up from the Zashiki Warashi’s lap.

He had set down the cards (which were treated as educational tools at school because the explanatory text was in English) and had gone to help his mother.

But left all alone, the Zashiki Warashi had been overwhelmed by the feeling that she had done something horrible.

To sum it up…

Huh?

Ten-year-old Shinobu is viewing me as a woman?

Afterwards, she had waved her hands around and gestured wildly while asking a human for help.

“Um, so I’m thinking I might have opened a lid in Shinobu’s heart that I shouldn’t have. Is this okay? Depending on what happens, I might need to commit seppuku. No, in a woman’s case, stabbing the blade into my throat would be the proper method!!”

But Shinobu’s mother had been carefree.

“I think this is a natural response.”

“Natural!?”

“According to psychology, the very first member of the opposite sex a boy will be interested in is his own mother. I think it’s called an Oedipus Complex. But they soon realize that’s ethically wrong, so it stops. That leads to the second step. The boy creates an image of the ideal woman based on his image of his mother. But that doesn’t mean he’ll search out someone just like me. It can be someone like his mother or someone who has something his mother doesn’t. It only starts at his mother, so it can branch out from there in countless ways.”

She had added on the unnecessary trivia that “Screwing up that second step is what leads to a real mother complex.”

“Based on Shinobu’s behavior, I think he’s following the ‘older’ side of me but going for someone who has what I lack. So it has to be a member of the opposite sex other than his mother who is nearby, older than him, and who he interacts with a lot. …Now, let me ask you something. Who best fits those conditions?”

“Uuh…”

She had understood once it was explained logically to her.

But on another level entirely, she had poked her index fingers together in front of her chest.

“Uuhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Ah ha ha! Did you think Shinobu was messenger of god, utterly devoid of impurity? This is just how boys are. Even preschoolers will readily say they’re going to marry their teachers. So Shinobu didn’t turn out like this because you did something wrong. You don’t need to worry about it or feel remotely responsible. There’s an animalistic side to all boys from the moment they’re born. It’s just that he’s something of a round stuffed animal monster right now. Gao.”

The Zashiki Warashi had flailed around and been unable to speak due to the various pressures bearing down on her, so Shinobu’s mother had realized what she had to say.

“Eh? You want to know how to speak with him now? I wouldn’t know that. That’s between you and him. I may be his mother, but I’m not about to become a monster that even knows what image he

has inside his heart. He might continue pursuing you and he might turn elsewhere after creating a second and third image of the ideal woman. That's up to him. Whether you want him to change or stay like this, you just have to behave accordingly. Although as his mother, I'm kind of excited and asking him to find a better woman than you seems like a fairly cruel quest."

"…!?"

"You don't want me to just abandon you? But you would prefer it if Shinobu liked you, right? And when it's a preschooler with his teacher or a middle schooler with his tutor, they'll generally keep watching for a while and have their feelings cool down once they notice the difference in age. But you can cheat there."

What did that mean?

Was there more to this?

The Zashiki Warashi had started to tremble and Shinobu's mother had shrugged.

"I'm pretty jealous of the fact that you don't age. If Shinobu grows up and even outgrows you, then the age difference won't stop him anymore. What do you think about that? I think that would remove all of the excuses you have in mind right now."

Chapter 3: Colorful Prequel@Hishigami Mai

Part 1

As all of Japan celebrated with mass consumption, Pretty Mai-chan casually drank some coffee while secretly carrying a handgun inside a regional airport lounge. Since it was winter, I wore a jacket over my tank top and pants, but the heat was on too high and I actually felt too warm. I was killing time until my usual client, Hyakki Yakou, arrived in their mobile fortress, but then my satellite phone received a call.

I grimaced as soon as I saw the number.

For a few seconds, I wondered if I should answer it or ignore it, but then, to my chagrin, I realized the caller would notice the hesitation behind those few seconds.

I answered it and someone I truly wanted to curse began speaking.

“Hi, Mai. It’s your Onii-chan. Do you know which Onii-chan this is?”

“Kyooooooooooooooooooooooooooou Oniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii-taaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!”

“Zei or Akane can take a curse for me, but please stop calling me Onii-tan at your age! It’s unreasonable! Ah, I’m really getting goose bumps!!”

“So what do you want?”

“How cold. That isn’t how reasonable siblings should speak to each other. Didn’t I just give you that Yozakura Ver. 3? Have you already forgotten what you owe me for that?”

“Family shouldn’t be talking about what they owe each other either.”

“My apologies. I was being unreasonable. I feel a bit like dying, but

I suppose that isn't reasonable either. Hee hee."

…Huh? What is with that kimono-wearing reasonable-obsessed man? Despite what he says, it sounds like he's started enjoying being a half step removed from being reasonable. Did something happen? …No, it couldn't be. This is one of the Hishigami Men I'm talking about.

"Now, I'd like to get down to business, Mai. Could you do your Onii-chan a favor?"

"That depends on what it is. If it's to kill you, I'll even do it for free."

I casually gave my usual sort of response, but the response I received was extremely unreasonable and nothing like his usual self.

"Yes. I give up, Mai. To be honest, I'm sick of it all. Could the Hishigami Women turn the Hishigami Group into a pile of rubble before it goes through any more disturbing transformations?"

……

The Hishigami Men referred to a passive gathering.

The Hishigami Women referred to an active parting.

Neither of them was good or evil. In times of chaos, the Hishigami Men would rise up and build a massive organization. In times of decadence, the Hishigami Women would rise up and destroy the rotten organization.

They were like the Eros and Thanatos for the entire human race.

The Hishigami Women brought disaster.

"I see…" I muttered into the satellite phone.

I leaned back in the lounge sofa, looked up at the tall, tall ceiling, and continued.

"So it's already reached that point, has it?"

"Everything must fall eventually. Although we're past decadence. You could say we're over-ripe or even rotting. I've given this a lot of thought. There are a few ways of rebuilding a failing corporation, but it's much harder to restrain a corporation that has grown

without end."

"Ohh, I see. Old Shikimi sure forced some annoying stuff onto us. What was that about being the founder of the Hishigami line? Is that anything to be proud of?"

"She didn't do anything wrong. An influential person said the moon was the only unattainable thing in a time of peace, but they actually wanted the obvious 'power' of a satellite. We are the artificial bloodline that was created as a result. That was the sin of someone who wanted to control the age and control reasonableness, so blaming Shikimi-san alone would be cruel, no matter how reasonable it looks."

"Maybe I should summon that noble bastard and place their soul in some Shikigami or another so I can kick their ass."

"You don't need to bother with anything so unreasonable. They must be cursing in heaven after the Apollo program beat them to it."

Kyou then changed the subject.

"Now, let's get back on topic. We intend to obey reasonableness to the end and there's nothing we can do if that reasonableness itself is unpleasant. I had hoped that Detective Uchimaku could do something, but it seems the flow of time was too fast for him. So Mai, could you please carry out your primary job? I want you to end my life before the reasonableness I know has left my understanding. Euthanasia is such a reasonable word, isn't it?"

"By the way, why me?"

“I thought you were the best fit.”

Hishigami Kyou nonchalantly answered me.

“There are quite a few Hishigami Women out there.

“Arawa who destroys birth.

“Shitsu who destroys education.

“Yuu who destroys systems.

“Yume who destroys ethics.

“Raku who destroys health.

“Kuji who destroys trust.

“Rou who destroys finances.

“Arata who destroys tradition.

“Taga who destroys faith.

“Ama who destroys hope.

“And many more.

“But this case is best suited for you, Mai. You might be even better

than Shikimi-san or Enbi here."

"And you know what my Hishigami role is?"

"You are Mai who destroys truth. That's perfect for this. …And scarily enough, you can seem even more bizarre than Shikimi, depending on how one looks at you."

I see.

Is the ability to look at me like that a sign of being "productive"? Well, I guess he's still a Hishigami Man no matter what might happen.

"How about it, Mai? Will you take on this job to help your Onii-chan save face? The Hishigami Group is starting to leave our control. It's disturbing, it keeps growing and won't die, and I don't even want to imagine being a part of that. Just talking about it here feels like it's going to give me nightmares. Ending it at the height of glory is the ultimate luxury. Stepping down from the stage is a choice only the victor can do. So please, Mai. Will you save my reasonable dignity?"

"Well…"

I laughed and adjusted my grip on the satellite phone.

"The great and fearsome Mai-chan will give the most perfect ending to her beloved Onii-tan. You will feel despair, fill with darkness, and lose all trust in the world, but if that's okay with you."

I heard a sigh from the phone.

It was a sigh of death filled with a hint of expectation.

But what was he thinking? Ending it at the height of glory? I'm a Hishigami Woman, you know? I'm not Old Shikimi, so did he really think I would choose to make someone happy in the way they expected me to?

"The best method of destroying the Hishigami Group *is to do nothing*. Watch as it rots and crumbles from within and suffer from necrosis while a means of painless death sits right before your eyes, Hishigami Man."

Kyou started to say something, but I ignored him and hung up. I tapped the floor with my boot that had a gun hidden in the heel.

Then I took a sip of coffee.

Stop relying on others, rich boy.

Or if you must, pray for a miracle and hope Youkai S@ik1 KAzU will be drawn to this age of arrogance.

Part 2

During the battle with the Aoandon, Hyakki Yakou had bought a new mobile base from Hishigami Aerospace Industries on short notice and it had already been dyed deeply in their colors. It looked just like the Imperial Court in Kyoto or a noble's mansion, so it was easy to forget you were five thousand meters in the air. It was a manmade structure, but it must have been comfortable for the nature-loving Youkai because they were lying around here and there without issue.

"Mom."

Among them were a mother and child of the harmless and adorable canine Youkai known as Sunekosuri.

"Lie down here and I'll groom you, mom."

"What is this, Gisuke? Unlike human babies, four-legged animals begin growing independent from the moment they stand up on their own a few hours after birth. Honestly, that husband is so useless. Did he not even teach you that?"

"Dad isn't useless. He kept his promise! He promised he would find you inside even the deepest darkness so we could live as a family of three again. He kept his promise between men."

"…"

"So he's amazing. I can only groom you because of him! He's my hero!"

"Stop that, Gisuke. It tickles."

The head of that Sunekosuri family was watching their exchange

from a short distance away…that is, at my feet. His eyes were growing damp as he entered “dad mode”, so I teased him with the toe of my boot.

“Sorry, but you can enjoy your family once we finish our job. You’re still a part of Hyakki Yakou, so you’re my point of contact and an official agent more than you are a father right now.”

“I know that.”

We silently left that warm scene of the two Sunekosuri.

There were other unfamiliar Youkai and occult practitioners around. The Byouki User was apparently always clinging to the Illness Magic guy and I believe the Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi was inside a special Japanese-style cell.

“So how dangerous is that, um, Ver. 39…the Zashiki Warashi in the red yukata? Uh, from what I’ve seen, I can’t imagine she’s dangerous.”

“That’s part of what we need to discuss with the young lady.”

As we spoke, we spotted something.

The young lady always stayed in the large hall that Hyakki Yakou called the Tenshukaku, but a sexy shrine maiden was currently crouched down in front of the sliding screen and peeking inside.

It seemed to be the Venom Clairvoyant, one of the Top 5.

“Wh-what is she doing?”

“A blindfolded shrine maiden is peeping. I feel like we’ve wandered into some kind of gag space.”

Part 3 (3rd person)

“Illness Magic.”

Hafuri, a girl in a purple kimono who was the leader of Hyakki Yakou, spoke in a dignified tone.

The Illness Magic User, one of the Top 5 which was Hyakki Yakou's greatest fighting force, had his head bowed so low that his forehead touched the floor. He wore a SWAT-like black combat outfit with plenty of curse charms held in the holsters. He sealed his own stress inside them and built it up to the level of Illness Magic, but his large muscular body was prostrated before the girl as he listened to her speak.

"Sorry for calling you on such short notice, but I decided I wanted you to hear about this first."

"Understood."

This had to be something important if she had called for one of the Top 5 who were known as her right-hand men. Plus, she had told everyone else, even her aides, to leave. The world below was apparently full of chaos after the international financial stagnation and crashes caused by the multiple credit rating agencies. People were using the network for a lucrative magic trick, a coalition force had set up a naval blockade, the Ministry of Defense was taking ominous actions, and a plan was underway to destroy the people's financial senses using the foreign-funded natural convenience stores that were disguised as a domestic project. Any solution would be far from peaceful. But wherever she might send him, the Illness Magic User was prepared to live up to her expectations.

He was confident his heart would remain steady no matter what command she gave him.

If this girl told him to die, he would die.

Hafuri then got to the main point.

"I only noticed this recently. Although maybe it isn't worth making a big deal out of…"

"What…?"

He guessed this was a metaphor for some kind of crucial plan.

But her next statement proved otherwise.

"Illness Magic, I seem to have gotten my first perio-…"

"Cough!!!!"

“Illness Magic?”

“Cough, cough. Oh, excuse me. My apologies, Hafuri-sama. I am delighted you would ask for my assistance.”

“I have not just sat idly by. I did everything I could to look into it. It seems the tradition is to cook red rice. There also seem to be a few different varieties of menstrual products, but I am having trouble making a decision on my own. Illness Magic, I want your help. Which should I choose? A pa-…”

“Cough, cough!! Ueh, cough!!!”

“…-pon? …Oh? What is the matter, Illness Magic!? If you’re having trouble controlling your stress, I can have some incense prepared!!”

Hafuri spoke worriedly to the Illness Magic User who had coughed up some blood.

He trembled in his prostrated position for a while, but he was confused and his mind was filled with question marks. Finally, he hesitantly raised an objection toward his leader.

“Um…”

“What is it?”

“Why would you ask me about this…?”

“You are something like my family doctor, aren’t you? No one is more knowledgeable of my body’s structure. I thought about asking the Mamedanuki who copies my appearance as my body double, but I thought you would be best since your knowledge includes the inside of my body.”

There was no hesitation in her voice and no hint of embarrassment or shyness, so it was obvious she really was just asking for his advice.

She truly trusted him.

From her point of view, this was the same as asking a familiar doctor for help after coming down with a cold.

But despite his appearance and skill, the Illness Magic User was a

sensible person.

And annoyingly enough, he had something of a samurai spirit.

He worked his mind at full power as he placed three fingers of each hand on the floor in a beautiful Japanese prostration.

(Ehh? It's true I needed to know the details of her body to create her surrogate mother, so I could draw up a diagram with my eyes closed. But I don't have a medical license, so wouldn't anything I did just be "playing doctor" with her and thus completely over the line as a human being?)

Unbearable pressure weighed on his stomach.

Even if this was a direct order, he was feeling a bit like committing seppuku.

To be clear, he had a naïve heart that built up stress exceedingly easily.

"What's the matter, Illness Magic?"

"N-nothing. But in that case, wouldn't it be better to ask my sister… yes, the Venom Clairvoyant?"

"Um, about that. I tried to ask, but it seems she does not use any kind of menstrual products. I think she called it menstrual blood control. It has to do with the way she walks and the way she tenses the muscles in her groin, but it sounded far too difficult for me."

"Then why not ask the Passionate Predator?"

"She specializes in phantom pregnancies, so I can't rely on her. I assume she lives a life without any real menstrual cycle. …Hey, Illness Magic? As you can see, you're the only one I can rely on. Can you please help me?"

A bright smile appeared on Hafuri's face.

A death pallor appeared on the Illness Magic's.

"…"

(What do I do!? I've built up too much trust!! No, there has to be some other way. Seppuku would be the easy way out, but Hafuri-sama's sadness would remain! What about the Byouki User? …No, I

suppose not. She came from the Aondon's group, so she's an outsider. She will prove her trustworthiness with her future loyalty and valor, but she still needs to be kept away from our leader. Allowing her to meet one-on-one with Hafuri-sama so soon could breed discord within the other powerful members who consider themselves regents and chief advisors. But then what do I do!?)

"Oh!! Right. Why not ask Mei-sama in her cell!?"

"You fool!! How could I talk about this with my own mother!! I'd be too embarrassed!!"

He could not figure out her standards for embarrassment and he nearly said as much, but he truly was a samurai living in the modern era. Bringing shame to his master with a tsukkomi was out of the question.

He remained prostrated and hesitantly worked at resolving the situation as if defusing a landmine.

"But…but Hafuri-sama. I unfortunately have lived a life that has given me little to no knowledge about that sort of feminine product…"

"Illness Magic."

She cut him off.

She gave off a majestic air of authority that felt like the cold and mysterious pattern on a drawn sword blade.

"Are you saying you intend to disobey the orders of me, Hyakki Yakou's leader?"

"No!! No!! I would never think of it, Hafuri-sama!!"

He lowered his head even more and scraped his forehead against the floor until the friction seemed it would start a fire. That serious human being was utterly worried about where destiny was leading him.

Forward, back, left, or right? Where was he supposed to go now!?

One sliding screen away, the Venom Clairvoyant was trembling.

The little sister had seen it all!!

"What…what happened to you, Onii-chan!? Ah! Come to think of it, when I was little, I messed up controlling the insects inside me and had him remove them. Don't tell me that knocked a screw loose and eventually led to him having no trouble playing history's greatest game of doctor here!? What do I do!? This is all my fault!!"

The sexy blindfolded shrine maiden's state would have been amusing if not for the fact that she was one of the Top 5, each of whom was rumored to be able to destroy a continent. None of the stuffed animal-like Youkai dared say anything.

That was why the Mamedanuki, acting as a representative for those stuffed animals, dragged in the Supernatural Trainer. That slender man in glasses and a butler uniform rubbed a finger against his temple and finally called out to her.

"Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing there? Have some restraint and quit sending out so much killer intent and scaring everyone around you."

"Ah!?"

"Besides, Hafuri-sama personally had everyone leave her. I don't really care what's going on in there, but don't blame me if she starts having her doubts about you and exiles you to some remote area."

"N-no, that's not what, um, this is, Supernatural!!"

"I don't know what's right or wrong here, but when Hafuri-sama tells us to stay away, we stay away. That's pretty standard, isn't it? Plus, each of us is just one finger on her hand. Know your place. I don't know what's gotten you so worked up, but did you think a single fingertip could outdo the head?"

"…"

She had no argument against that.

For one thing, she had no way of knowing what Hafuri really wanted. For some reason – for some reason!! – she did have a feeling something awful was going to happen beyond that sliding screen, but that was only from her point of view. A single command from Hafuri could decide the fate of the nation, so the girl might not understand how someone could let their thoughts break down and stop strategizing, even over something minor. After all, even the small things could indirectly influence the history of the world for her.

The Venom Clairvoyant had no choice but to accept this.

She was incredibly reluctant, but she slowly stood up from her crouched position in order to leave.

That was when she heard a creaking metal sound. That quiet noise seemed to grab the blindfolded shrine maiden with an invisible hand and turn her head in that direction.

There, she found another of the Top 5.

It was the Heirloom Transcender.

The elderly man sat in a wheelchair with a worn out canopy and he looked up at her face.

The old man in Japanese clothing did not speak a single word.

But he did nod just once.

And the look in his eyes eloquently told her to do as she wished.

(Old Heirloom!!)

The Venom Clairvoyant teared up behind her blindfold, but she had something more important to focus on. She had something to do now that someone had given her that push forward. Two old German handguns flew from the sleeves of her shrine maiden outfit.

“Ah, wait a second!! We’re inside the palace!!”

The Supernatural Trainer quickly tried to stop her, but she was not listening. As if guided by a voice from heaven, the Venom Clairvoyant kicked down the sliding screen and stepped inside.

“Curse you, Onii-chan!! Don’t you know that’s a crime!!!??”

Part 4

A few of the other Top 5 had leaped around to restrain the crazed blindfolded shrine maiden (for some reason the old Heirloom man had nodded calmly without doing anything to help, so he had probably been nodding off to sleep), and the woman was now cooling her head inside a cell.

For some reason, the young lady holed up in the back for a while afterwards.

She seemed to be discussing something with a few of the female Youkai in the organization: a Tengu woman, a Futakuchi-Onna, and a Hinoenma. I also got to see the rare sight of that Illness Magic guy desperately begging those Youkai for help.

“Sorry about the wait.”

The young lady looked refreshed when she reappeared.

She seemed oddly calm for so soon after a rampage by the Top 5.

She quickly got down to business.

“This is probably related to the Venom Clairvoyant too…but it seems it will take a while longer before she will listen. What on earth got into her? It might be that one of the insects that literally has ‘gotten into her’ is causing issues, but…”

The Sunekosuri trembled at my feet.

A direct battle between the Top 5 must have been quite scary. That was hardly surprising when a bit of slapstick from them could sink an entire continent. How could anyone watch that in mild amusement?

“M-maybe it’s a control issue? I don’t understand how anyone could actually raise insects like that. Tremble tremble.”

“Oh, but speaking of that blindfolded shrine maiden…”

“We have the help of my mother…of the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi, but the analysis suggests she lacks the output needed to resist the destiny of doom.”

That really wasn’t good.

Everyone seemed to call the old Hyakki Yakou the strongest, and this was the best they could do now.

No matter where you went, even the greatest would decay.

“Well, if everything was always smooth sailing with the occult, I guess your ancestors wouldn’t have been defeated at Dan-no-Ura.”

“?”

Globe & Ingot, Triple Roses, and the world’s other credit rating agencies had started putting out completely contradictory lists and the value of national bonds was collapsing around the world. Was everyone just spinning their wheels? Had they created a black box? Whatever you wanted to call it, the effects had spread.

The American dollar and the European euro had of course been affected. The Chinese yuan, the Brazilian real, the Indian rupee, the Russian ruble, and the South African rand of the so-called five developing countries were no exception. The Korean won, the Hong Kong dollar, the Australian dollar, and pretty much everything else had been taken out too. I think even electronic money and virtual currencies were hit.

The only survivors were those in the network. Those were the air pockets that had been left open because everyone had forgotten about them or looked down on them. And for better or for worse, Japan was one of those.

That was the overall outline of the issue.

But that was strange at a fundamental level.

The rise of Safe Banking, Triple Roses, Pengjia Gongsi, and the other credit rating agencies made sense. But there’s no way they would have put out such contradictory rating lists. Those ratings weren’t something the agency just decided on. Just like the weather forecast, the experts were calculating them. It would take a lot of

work and time, but an amateur could find the answer if they tried. If you put out a completely nonsensical list, the amateur investors would see through it and it would all be over.

Yet that hadn't happened.

Everyone seemed to believe this prophecy of doom even though everyone wanted to deny it.

So the core of the problem was not money, bonds, or data. It was the movement of people's hearts.

And we had predicted the source of the problem quite early on.

It was a Youkai of fortune.

It was the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi that brought ruin.

And this one in particular had been given the power to freely manipulate the world's destiny by Hyakki Yakou.

The Sunekosuri rubbed against my feet.

"The Ver. 39 is at the center of this, isn't she?"

"Yes. And because the Ver. 40 was made to stably alter destiny with almost no risk, her power is always even and she supposedly cannot match the upper limits of the Ver. 39's harshly fluctuating power."

"Yes, Majina's solution was to strengthen the population by turning all 150 million of them into zombies. While the entire population was restraining the Red, he wanted to use the Ver. 40's stable power to alter destiny. Even that genius among geniuses couldn't come up with a better answer, so we should assume it's nearly impossible to solve this with no sacrifices."

"You readily mention sacrifices, but are you saying it would be possible if we allowed for them?"

The young lady's question caused the Sunekosuri to tremble even more violently.

"I don't really know."

As a professional, it would be insincere if I was too quick to say it was impossible.

“The Red is inside Noukotsu Village, so the area around it has likely become an invisible labyrinth. If anyone tries to approach with intent to harm her, the destiny of the world itself will get in their way. And even if they don’t intend to harm her, if they’re being used by someone else, the same thing will happen. Frankly, it’s strange that Majina was able to get that close to her.”

In fact, was it possible the blindfolded shrine maiden had gone nuts because the destiny was working in the Red’s favor? Given the situation, even those seemingly ridiculous things were no laughing matter.

The problem was not the comedy space itself.

That Venom Clairvoyant could directly view the future and destiny, yet she had been manipulated so thoroughly. She was the top specialist who had the greatest odds of seeing through the Ver. 39’s power, so she had been taken out first and foremost. And the rails of destiny had switched over entirely seamlessly. No one knew when we had wandered onto this path. If the bomb squad with a mine detector had stepped on a landmine, what were the rest of us supposed to do?

I also needed to keep an eye on the movements of anyone who had approached the heart of this, such as my sister Enbi, anyone related to Kotemitsu, and the Ver. 40 in her cell. *If they were doing anything out of the ordinary,* I could assume they were already under destiny’s influence. There was a chance they were being manipulated by a labyrinth of inescapable comedy space.

So to challenge the Ver. 39, you first had to be accepted by her so you could approach.

For better or for worse, a variety of coincidences would occur, even the most thorough of preparations would easily crumble, and you would be forced to give up before you realized it. Happiness was a frightening thing. People could be promoted and transferred to some remote area because human beings could not fight happiness. And the Zashiki Warashi could manipulate that to alter things to her satisfaction. And it didn’t matter if she was aware of it or not. To stand on the same field as her, you would need a powerful bond on the level of knowing her since before your birth and you would need to be able to sniff out her every habit.

But that probably wasn’t our role.

It was a high school boy in Noukotsu Village who held the key. Sadly enough.

The young lady was thinking about all this too.

“I doubt that unstable Ver. 39 can intercept us quite that accurately…”

“You understand, don’t you? If the Red creates this worst case scenario and then falls apart, no one knows what will happen afterwards. It’s like having a nuclear sub sneak up into our front yard and then have a meltdown before firing its ballistic missile.”

“So there will still be damage, but we won’t be able to predict what it will be?” asked the Sunekosuri.

I sighed.

“It’s a nuisance either way.”

“Is it possible that the rupture of destiny will cause space-time to collapse?”

“Ask the Venom woman to deal with those apocalyptic simulations. But to put it another way, the entire world is currently under the Ver. 39’s influence. It’s just like this mobile base. If all the engines started spewing flames, how much chance would we have of landing safely?”

Yes, we couldn’t just defeat the source of the problem.

This wasn’t that simple.

Even if the visible problem was financial, we couldn’t take it lightly. The Zashiki Warashi had the power to control destiny, so our opponent here was the world’s destiny. Not of Japan, or of Asia, or of Earth, or of the Solar System, or of the Milky Way. Of the entire giant framework called “the world”. This may have even gone beyond the level of the creator gods. Was this really something that humans could handle?

A decline always awaited the prosperous.

That was the scope on which the fangs and claws of destiny worked. How many beings could oppose that entire irreversible stream? This world even had plenty of gods who had been entirely

forgotten.

“You are not a part of Hyakki Yakou and sometimes have a more flexible mindset because of it, so I have one question for you.”

“Ask away.”

“What can we do?”

That question held great meaning.

I shrugged and gave a simple answer.

“Well, it doesn’t look like there are any obstacles you need to remove. I thought some idiot would show up to attack Hyakki Yakou since you were weakened by the Aoandon’s group and because they could use Majina’s zombie outbreak as a justification, but there’s no sign of it.”

“For better or for worse, that would be thanks to the Aoandon. She searched out all of the people who ‘wanted a change’ around the country. In other words, she gathered together all of the dangerous elements and allowed us to defeat them all at once. Those who refused her invitation or that she decided were not worth inviting probably don’t have it in them to bare their fangs against Hyakki Yakou now.”

“In that case, our only opponent is the Red herself.”

“That brings us back to the previous problem. There is an invisible forest around Noukotsu Village that will lead anyone astray. That nearly impossible labyrinth will block our way by seamlessly manipulating the entire world’s destiny. What can we do about that?”

Hmm.

It isn’t like a professional to admit this.

But when faced with this direct threat, it isn’t like me to avoid the issue in the name of pride or honor. I guess I have to say it.

“You often hear people irresponsibly saying they’re rooting for a couple’s love, but I honestly don’t know if that’s ever actually helped.”

That’s what this came down to.

Scarily enough, the future of seven billion people was riding on the decision of a lovey-dovey couple.

Part 5 (3rd person)

After completing her meeting with Hishigami Mai, the girl in a purple kimono, Hafuri, left her seat in the great hall once more. She kept her Mamedanuki body double by her side for the bare minimum of protection as she walked down the kind of hallway found in an old house of ancient Kyoto, but she finally turned to the Mamedanuki.

“You stay here.”

“Young lady.”

“Don’t worry. Hyakki Yakou’s techniques are solid. More importantly, this is family.”

After the battle with Majina ended and the mourning period was over, the girl had changed into a brighter colored kimono once more.

The stuffed animal-like Mamedanuki sounded worried, but Hafuri smiled faintly and placed her hand on the entrance. It was more of a gate than a door. Even without a lock, its pure thickness and weight made the wooden door difficult to open. Its design was as complex as parquetry and it would strictly prevent anyone aside from Hafuri and a very few caretakers to open it.

Something flowed out from the darkness beyond the slight crack that opened.

That alone changed the air. The atmosphere seemed to swallow her up.

Or perhaps it could be called the age itself.

Even the concepts of time and distance were cut off by that deep darkness to preserve its isolation.

She gathered all her strength in her small hands and the gate easily

opened as if its thickness and weight were a lie.

Two tearooms were contained within.

The one Hafuri stepped into had wooden flooring and the other had a tatami mat floor.

The two tearooms were separated by a sturdy lattice of peach wood which was known to destroy evil and the only way between the two was a small door that even a child like Hafuri would need to duck down to pass through.

It was a traditional Japanese-style cell.

“Mother,” she called out.

The candles in the candlesticks faintly illuminated her skin in the darkness.

She did not hear the rustling of clothing or even any breathing.

Nevertheless, someone was there.

She had glossy black hair cut at the shoulder, much like Hafuri. She had smooth skin that was far from healthy but required far more than just the word “alluring” to describe. Beyond the veil that thinly covered half her face, two differently-colored and unblinking eyes pierced Hafuri. The woman’s white yukata was falling from her shoulders and she made no attempt to hide her ample bodylines as she sat with her legs turned to one side. She looked like a nonliving ornament or like a hallucination. The head-mounted display around her neck had a horribly modern streamlined shape that seemed to stand out within the fog.

This was the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi.

This was Mei.

This was the girl’s mother.

“How have you been?”

The sexy Youkai did not respond to Hafuri’s question.

The girl herself had trouble deciding what she wanted here. Imprisonment in this evil-destroying cell was a last ditch attempt to suppress the Ver. 40’s power to change the world’s destiny, but she

did not even know if that was the right thing to do. There was no precedent for this. The Venom Clairvoyant, who could see into the gaps between every world regardless of causality and the timeline, had given her approval, but even she had no way of proving the accuracy of what she saw. It was possible even she was being guided and manipulated.

Mei said nothing.

She did not utter a single word, she did not stir, and it was suspect whether she was even breathing or her heart was beating. Without her caretakers, she would likely have a thin layer of dust on her hair and shoulders. It was as if her controller had been lost with the death of a certain man.

And that was why Hafuri began to think she was really just speaking with herself here.

“We may have destroyed what you were working toward.”

Words which would never receive a response escaped the girl’s lips like the starting few drops of a downpour.

“And that may have brought the very world you feared.”

Mei did not move.

She was as motionless as an abandoned toy or doll.

“But we do not regret our choice.”

Nevertheless, the words did not stop.

That isolated cell was filled with a wordless pressure, a silent headwind, and an incredible sense of futility, but Hafuri spoke to shake off that weight of her own creation.

“There may be nothing we can do and we may be approaching the peak of foolishness by sitting idly by and leaving the fate of the world in the hands of an amateur high school boy, but we will remain proud that we opposed your attempt to solve this with an all-encompassing zombie outbreak. I may never have learned anything from you – no, from you two – directly, but I have learned one thing.”

She calmly looked directly into those unfocused eyes.

She persistently looked directly into those pupils that simply reflected the candlelight.

“I am a foolish and powerless half-breed,” clearly stated Hafuri. “I lack the immortal body of a Youkai and I may lack the proper blood needed to rule as this organization’s human leader.”

She placed a hand on her flat chest. She accepted, pondered, and spoke the fact that had shaken her very existence.

“But that is why I will make this foolish attempt once more in the very, very end. We have passed the crossroads and there are no theoretical means left, but I will still struggle. The Hyakki Yakou that currently exists, the Hyakki Yakou that you wished for, and the Hyakki Yakou I wish to create may all be different things, but that is why I will show you the Hyakki Yakou I brought about on my own, not one that was given to me.”

She had said all she needed to say.

She had finished facing herself, rather than her mother.

She had gathered her feelings.

She bowed and prepared to turn her back on the evil-destroying peach lattice, but then something unbelievable happened.

The Zashiki Warashi in a white yukata moved.

“…”

It was a small thing. As Mei sat near the lattice, she slowly brought her right hand to her chest and tapped the head-mounted display with her index finger. But even that miniscule change was enough of a shock to erase all thought from Hafuri’s mind. From a causality viewpoint, this was as ridiculous as the earth suddenly reversing direction in its orbit around the sun.

It took her more than a minute before she finally moved her numbed tongue and spoke a new word.

“Moth…er…?”

That was all.

During battle, this current leader of Hyakki Yakou could meet one hundred situations with one hundred strategies and plan out her

possibilities one hundred steps in advance, but that one word was all she could produce with the full use of her mind.

Mei of course did not reply.

She only tapped the device around her neck once more.

(That thing…?)

Hafuri reached a small hand into the cell. The gaps in the lattice were large enough that a child like her could fit her head through if she wanted to. Mei put up no resistance as Hafuri gently removed the head-mounted display and took it. She toyed with the device that retained her mother's warmth and the scent of her hair. It had no cables connected to it, but did that mean it was a standalone device or did Mei have a wireless video player in her yukata? It was hard to tell, but Hafuri finally placed the display over her eyes, fixed it in place with the multiple rubber straps, felt for the button near her temple, and pressed it.

The concept of a screen did not really apply.

From Hafuri's point of view, it looked like a life-sized human being was standing in the darkness in front of her.

And that person was Majina, the leader of the old Hyakki Yakou.

"…!?"

"Hi, Hafuri. This is probably a bit of a shock since Mei doesn't speak much, so did I surprise you? It's your dad."

Her tall father had his long hair tied back. That man had swapped an eye with his wife Mei. With his anachronistic dress clothes and monocle, he seemed to have stepped out of a painting of old nobility. He was not looking at Hafuri as he spoke. This was nothing more than a recording of the past. And yet young Hafuri was unable to escape his eyes.

Was that because she had yet to rid herself of her fear for this powerful enemy?

Or did it come from some other emotion?

"If you've come across this footage…or rather, *if you've managed to make physical contact with Mei who can distort the world*, I should

assume I'm no longer with you. It's not a future I like to think about, but it's also something of a complicated feeling. Maybe this is how a father feels when he sees his daughter leaving him."

The past image of Majina continued speaking to his shocked daughter.

"Always prepare for the worst. Make sure a path to resisting the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi remains no matter how this ends. Hafuri, this may qualify as meddling since you've already left me, but allow me to give you a parting gift as we head in different directions at this fork in the road. It is up to you whether you will actually use it or not."

It happened suddenly.

Light entered the darkness filling her vision. It revealed a wall. It was likely somewhere in Mikuchi-sama, that pit in Mt. Boseki that had acted as the center of the zombie outbreak. The wall of a crude wooden shack was covered in so much old Japanese paper that she could not see the color of the wall behind it.

The papers all contained the greatest secrets of Hyakki Yakou.

Some were diagrams, some were ritual prayers, and some were patterns.

But this was not just a random arrangement. The massive amount of information had a point in common.

"The Zashiki Warashi…?"

"Let me be blunt. If you use these 108 secret rituals to their fullest, you will arrive at the same zombie outbreak as I did. But you rejected that. In that case, let's cut the conditions in half. You need to use the same material I had, yet walk a different path than me. This contains a method of amplifying a Zashiki Warashi's power and a method of *intentionally breaking* the balance of a half-Zashiki Warashi like you. There are methods of killing Youkai and methods of using them. How you use this is up to you. Please complete a recipe that I could not think of."

Hafuri was still overwhelmed, but Majina winked at her as if he were enjoying himself.

"My only useless advice is to keep an eye on Jinnai Shinobu-kun in

the Intellectual Village named Noukotsu Village. I can't imagine I would lose, but if it does happen, it wouldn't be from a clash with the greatest force of the pre-established harmony like the Top 5. It would have to be a surprise element like him. Does that ring a bell? If so, then rely on that. He can get along with any Youkai. As a half-Youkai, it's up to you who you want to rely on, but I'm sure he'll help you."

Majina then cut himself off with a truly powerful "but".

His next words were set up by that denial.

Hafuri found herself putting up her guard as her father made a solemn prophecy.

"Do not take that Youkai-attracting side of him lightly. Grow careless and you too will fall victim to it. Now, I want to believe in Jinnai Shinobu-kun's conscience, but…no, no. I just can't carelessly place my trust in him here!!"

"…"

Hafuri fell silent, but the past image of Majina did not stop.

"I brought Mei to meet you during the battle with the Aoandon, but she saw Shinobu-kun then too, didn't she? Oh, I'm worried! I'm so worried! He's apparently completely won over the red one, so I have no proof the exact same logic won't work on the white one! And a half-Zashiki Warashi like you is in danger too!! Oh, I just can't imagine I would die, but if that does happen, it would make sense that Mei would leave Hyakki Yakou. But if you're viewing this video, it means some kind of powerful anchor kept her in place. The odds are pretty good it would be Shinobu-kun's ability to attract Youkai that would keep her from wandering off and that means my death brings the serious possibility of both Mei and Hafuri falling for him. That's all the more reason I can't afford to lose!!"

"…"

Hafuri felt like her mouth had become a small triangle.

"Hey…hey, Hafuri? Can I ask you something? Mei would definitely punch me if she heard this, so I can't be too open about it…but in 'that world' where I've died, Mei isn't showing any odd signs, is she? No! I trust my wife!! But! But!! If you are seeing any hints of change, then find any time you can while dealing with the

Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi and use it to stop Mei!! A-ahem. Listen, Hafuri. This isn't just the vain struggles of a pathetic man who's having his wife and daughter stolen at the same time. We're talking about the Ver. 39 – that is, the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi – and the completed Ver. 40. Oh, and you, the half-Zashiki Warashi with unknown hidden possibilities. It would be very, very bad if all three of you fall into Shinobu-kun's hands. Far too much of the world's causality would be concentrated in a single point! To make sure he doesn't become the next Alexander the Great…yes, to protect the future of the mankind, you need to protect Mei!! Please!!"

"……

Hafuri briefly thought about forgetting everything, tearing the device from her head, and throwing it to the floor, but then a hand reached in from outside her vision.

It belonged to the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi. That is, to her mother.

Hafuri removed the head-mounted display as if to shake off the past image of Majina that continued to cling regretfully to her and she found Mei's hand reaching out through the peach lattice.

That hand was preventing her from destroying the device, but it was somehow reminiscent of a mother rubbing her child's head.

Hafuri stared blankly for a moment but finally understood.

(That's…that's right… Even this may be a part of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi's ruinous destiny.)

She would have destroyed that valuable information.

She would have closed that path.

No grand violence was necessary. Slight coincidences would coincide and bits of bad luck would pass by at the worst possible moment. That was why this kind of message had reached Hafuri in her current mental state. It may have looked comical at first glance, but impulsively slamming the device to the floor might have meant losing the 108 secret rituals of the old Hyakki Yakou.

Mei had noticed and stopped her daughter.

Even as the evil-destroying peach restrained her power, she was resisting the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.

That was the gap between the completed Ver. 40 and a half-Zashiki Warashi like Hafuri.

It was an overwhelming difference.

Even after losing her beloved, losing her very raison d'être, and being weakened by the current Hyakki Yakou's greatest seal, she remained on the side of protection. The actual action may have been small, but not even Hafuri could imagine how many threads of fate she had needed to slip past to reach that point.

That was a Zashiki Warashi.

They had no fierce fangs or claws, but they could perceive and control destiny to bring great fortune.

They sought no reason or reward from that fortune.

"…"

Mei's lips parted slightly.

The Ver. 40 did not even need to breathe, so this had to be to communicate her thoughts.

Hafuri had not heard her voice since bringing her here.

In fact, Hafuri had not heard her voice from the day she had been born.

Hafuri focused on Mei's lips so she could read the words on them even without an actual voice, but Mei did produce a scratchy voice.

"…What kind of person is this Jinnai Shinobu? I'm a little curious…"

A distant look entered Hafuri's eyes as she realized how much she needed to brace herself.

Shared Memory 3

“Hey, Good-for-Nothing.”

By about the second year of middle school, Shinobu had stopped hiding his words.

Instead of the Buddhist altar room, they had been inside the room newly prepared for the Zashiki Warashi. (Needless to say, this was because that Indoor Youkai had gathered so much manga, games, and other entertainment items that they were hesitant to invite their relatives and the Buddhist priest to the memorial services.) They had been speaking while playing a dance game using a special mat controller.

The controller had rows of foot buttons lined up like a certain foreign party game and multiple people were meant to step on them.

This had naturally created a troublesome problem.

“What?”

“Those things swaying in front of my eyes are in the way. They’re distracting me when we’re supposed to be working together! Sometimes they nearly slap me, so do something about those rampaging 98 cm!!”

“Are you not even trying to hide your vulgar side anymore!?”

“The only thing that needs to be hidden right now are your breasts! At least do something during these harder dances. They’re right there on the verge of popping out, and that’s worst of all!! I can’t focus!! If you’re gonna do that, you might as well just pull the whole things out!!”

Shinobu had dyed his hair blond, perhaps to copy his Uncle Hayabusa during his high school days, and the Zashiki Warashi’s heart trembled as he shouted at her.

Was this okay?

Was this really okay?

What had happened to the Jinnai Shinobu whose eyes had sparkled as he said he could get along with any Youkai!? Could she really allow a rebellious phase like this!? She was frightened by how quickly humans changed because they were bound by their

lifespans.

“M-mwohh-mwohhhhhhh…”

“You’ve changed.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you!!”

“You used to be so considerate and caring, so how did you end up like this? You get noticeably more good-for-nothing every day and you’re only getting any better at pointless skills like online gaming and trolling message boards. I mean, your entire life cycle is messed up. How many potato chips do you go through in a day? It only works because you’re a Youkai. If you were a normal human, you’d be one of those unbelievably fat foreigners who need to be rescued because they can’t leave their room.”

The Zashiki Warashi had only turned out that way because Shinobu had taught her about human entertainment, but he had not noticed his own influence on her.

“Yes, yes. But this is fine. Playing is part of a Zashiki Warashi’s job.”

“That’s one hell of an argument. And it’s poison for me since I have to start thinking about entrance exams soon.”

Their feet had not missed a beat even as they spoke to each other. While the Zashiki Warashi had worked hard at this every day (so she could play with Shinobu), Shinobu had simply been good at it. The game came down to how one used their feet, but he would occasionally ignore the example by using his hands, turn his back to the screen while maintaining perfect timing, or do something reminiscent of breakdancing.

“Oh, right. Hey, Zashiki Warashi?”

“What? I’m not returning your smartwatch yet, if that’s what it’s about.”

“Give it back! That thing’s popularity is gonna be shorter-lived than a cicada, so I need to show it off to my class while I can! Oh, but that’s not what I was going to say.”

“Then what is it?”

“Well.” They had both looked to the screen while side by side. “I’ve

started going out with Nagisa."

A beeping much like a quiz show's "wrong answer" buzzer had played from the flat screen TV.

"You idiot! That was the entrance to the bonus zone! Why would you miss that!?"

"Eh? Oh, sorry, Shinobu."

The Zashiki Warashi had slowly gotten back on track, but her movements had lacked their previous edge.

"Get it together. I'm helping you unlock the hidden character for your account, so we need to get over eighty thousand points. I don't want to repeat the same song again and again."

Shinobu had complained, but the Zashiki Warashi had not been listening. In fact, her head had been filled with question marks.

She had been forcibly trying to verbalize something she had not understood.

Huh? Why do I feel hurt by that?

Why is there a hole in my chest?

In fact, was there even something in my chest to get a hole in it?

Chapter 4: Be Dyed in Red@???

Part 1 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Let's go back over the conditions.

There are apparently two broad categories of Zashiki Warashi.

The normal Zashiki Warashi that preferred to wear a white kimono protected one's assets and happiness.

The dangerous Zashiki Warashi that preferred to wear a red kimono brought bankruptcy and ruin.

It isn't actually known whether they are entirely different species or if the clothing they wear changes depending on certain conditions and the timing. When it comes to Zashiki Warashi, there are even theories that they settle down alone and theories that they do so as twins.

Regardless, our Yukari preferred to wear a red yukata.

That meant she was the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.

Normally, that would only wipe out the family from food poisoning or a fire. It would never destroy a country or the world. I think Majina had said the Jinnai family only lasted more than a century with the Zashiki Warashi with us because of our great fortune and assets. We had earned more than was being taken away. We had handled that misfortune just fine. Our ancestors had been monsters in their own way.

But that would not last forever.

For one thing, Yukari was not just "any old" Zashiki Warashi.

She was the Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi.

She was a special Zashiki Warashi that had been given the ability to distort the world's destiny not just by Hyakki Yakou but by techniques they considered to be lost.

I had no idea why the Hyakki Yakou of the time had wanted to give something as dreadful as the Ver. 39 to Yukari who had been “red” from the beginning. She may have been the only sample they had to work with and they may have wanted to use the power of destiny for military purposes by intentionally spreading that ruinous power.

That didn’t matter now.

That combination had led to the current unbelievable situation.

The world would end if we didn’t do something.

The multiple credit rating agencies and the world’s inability to measure the value of government bonds was one way that would happen, but it was not the only way. Unless we dealt with this at a fundamental level, fixing the global economy would solve nothing. Ruin would arrive again in some other form and it would keep happening until it worked.

“So what exactly are you going to do?”

The Nekomata approached while I was looking up at the moon and thinking on the porch.

“You’re true to your desires, so I doubt you would be satisfied with a beautifully platonic ending of waiting for the end in your lover’s arms as the world falls to ruin around you. There’s still a lot you want to do, so what will you do about it?”

“I can’t mess with the Ver. 39.”

I quietly answered and my voice vanished into the night air that was a little chilly in just a hoodie and shirt.

“Not even the current Hyakki Yakou understands it, so an amateur high school boy can’t mess with it. The Ver. 40…Mei, was it? Anyway, things might be different if we had her body to look at, but even that wouldn’t help much. Besides, Majina was enough of an expert to create the Ver. 40 from scratch and even he threw in the towel. I doubt we can do anything on that front. I expect she’d either lose control of destiny or die of a ruptured organ. Both of those options are unacceptable.”

“Then you’re going with the other condition?”

“Yeah.” I moved my eyes from the moon to the Nekomata. “The

dangerous Zashiki Warashi prefers red. Doesn't it seem like we could figure something out about that rather than grasping at a cloud with the Ver. 39?"

"Does it? They both seem unlikely to me. Besides, what does it mean to prefer a color? If the Zashiki Warashi announces she'll start wearing a white yukata from now on, will all this chaos settle down? Does she just have to avoid red day after day? I seriously doubt it's that simple."

Yes.

She had to switch from red to white.

The issue of preference was clear, but changing it would be difficult.

If a child hated carrots, it was still possible to make him eat them. You could discipline him until he would eat every last one. Or you could chop them up and mix them in with fried rice or Salisbury steak to get him to eat them without knowing it. But wouldn't it be far more difficult to actually making him *like* carrots? In fact, was it even possible?

You often hear people say their tastes changed when they grew up, but that would be entirely up to coincidence. I didn't think it was something you could intentionally cause by human means.

So if I was trying to distort that, there was only one way to describe it.

"Hey, Nekomata."

"What is it?"

"I think I'm about to do the worst thing in the world. This might even be something Majina avoided, so I don't care if you look down on me for it."

"…"

"But don't stop me."

I spoke quietly yet powerfully to the silent Nekomata.

"If she'll walk by my side and if there's still a way of doing everything I still want to do, then I'll do anything. I've finally found

something that makes me think my principles can come second. So don't you stop me. I'll never give up before doing this."

I heard a sigh that almost sounded like a laugh.

The cat couldn't form facial expressions, though.

"Then do what you want. I haven't exactly lived a praiseworthy life, but I have no intention of regretting it."

"I see."

Saying it and having someone else hear it seemed to have cleared things up for me.

What I was doing here was kind of like rejecting my past actions. I had run across many different Packages, analyzed their structure, determined the weakness of the Youkai being used, and turned everything around at the last second.

I had even defeated Majina, the leader of the old Hyakki Yakou, like that, but now I would be doing the opposite.

That is…

"I will create a Package."

I said it.

I finally said it.

"I will personally create a Package that suppresses that dangerous trait so I can walk alongside the girl I've fallen for."

The Nekomata did not curl up on the spot.

She continued standing tall and looked up into my eyes.

She was being courteous because this was not something to listen to while curled up.

"Oh? So this time your love isn't shallow enough to joke about?"

"Well, I was always this serious at the time…"

"But you always ran off. Whenever you sensed you couldn't deal with it any longer, you had a habit of backing out. That's how you

preserved your peaceful life rather than going for something akin to a heroic double suicide. You can't deny that."

"…"

"But something was different this time. You can actually face what you want to protect, even if that means burning away your own body. I suppose you could say the eggshell has finally fallen away from the chick's tail."

Perhaps so.

That may have been true.

I had no real proof, but I had a feeling that *if the world tried to kill the Zashiki Warashi to protect its peace, I would not have hesitated to become a being that could destroy the world. And this wasn't just an adolescent delusion. I really did think that might be the case.*

"So where are you going to start? We're talking about a criminal Package here. No matter how hard you work, you can't do that on your own. You need dozens if not hundreds of people, specialized knowledge, and a Youkai to build into it. The Ver. 39 power is connected to the whole world, so you'll have to keep this quiet. You can't have someone slipping in a backdoor after all. You were already planning to get me involved, weren't you? But who else are you going to use?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

I breathed in and looked up to the moon again.

"I'll use everything I can."

Part 2 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The answer had been in front of my eyes all along.

It had been hanging in front of my eyes since ten years ago.

"This construction paper?"

All of the Youkai except the Zashiki Warashi were gathered in the living room and I showed them the child's drawing I had dug from the back of the closet. It was the original of what I had on my smartphone.

Humans and Youkai were smiling in a circle and the words "We're All Friends" were written over their heads.

But that wasn't the point.

That wasn't what I wanted to take from it.

"Look at this, everyone."

I pointed at one point on the edge of the construction paper.

Yes.

"Um, is that the sun?"

The Succubus looked puzzled. It was just a spiraling circle drawn in red crayon, so she looked skeptical that it could really help solve this worldwide problem.

But it could.

It was the key to the one and only right answer.

"That's right. Think about it. The sun is red. I think any kid would draw it that way, but it's weird if you think about it. If you look up in the blue sky, you aren't going to see a red sun there."

"Um…"

"But if you pass a kid a crayon, they'll all use red to draw the sun. Why? Because they aren't looking up at the sun to check on the color. It's based on the image in their head. It's a mass of fire, so of course they think it's red. *They redraw the actual scene with their imaginary color. That's why they picture the sun as red despite what the actual scene shows.*"

Some of them seemed to be gradually catching on.

Marguerite the Witch cut in while rubbing her chin with her slender fingers.

"Those are called memory colors, right? The concept is widely used

in the field of magic. Fire is red, water is blue, wind is yellow, and earth is green. By coloring your cards and weapons accordingly, you can picture things more easily during certain rituals."

"The Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi prefers to wear a red yukata. We can't change that part. After all, she's been doing that for centuries and it's indelibly stained her heart. Confiscating her yukata and throwing white clothes at her wouldn't change the fact that she loves red, so it wouldn't free her from the bonds of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi."

"So you'll use memory colors?" asked the Aburatori. "You'll have her focus on the color in her head over the color she sees? Wait, do you mean…!?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "What if the kimono she grabs, thinking its red, is actually white?"

Everyone there gasped.

It wasn't an issue of her body. We were talking about her mind, about her perception.

This was the worst possible method, but it was the only way of overcoming this incident without anyone dying.

"We'll overturn her perception of color. We'll turn red to white and white to red."

If this didn't get through to them it was all over.

If they said it was unrealistic, unusable, inhumane, or cruel and then rejected it, the path would close off.

After all, I didn't have the skills or manpower to do this. Convincing everyone was absolutely necessary to save the Zashiki Warashi.

But that was exactly why I had to tell them this. If I hid anything, I would never gain their trust, so I could only lay out everything I had and pray!

I was no hero.

I was saying I would be dragging them all into a criminal Package!

"With a Package like that, she would think she loved red while actually always choosing white! If it worked, she would unwittingly

become a white Zashiki Warashi!”

Silence followed.

Had it worked?

Had it?

I had thought and thought until my mind boiled over to come up with this answer, but what would they think of it? It was absurd and silly, but had I built up enough trust for them to go along with it? Or would they flinch back at the thought of messing with her mind.

And then…

“Sounds good to me.”

The Aoandon spoke up slowly without thinking too deeply about it.

“I honestly thought my mama would end up being that human girl named Kotemitsu, but that’s your decision, papa. And I guess you could switch between a Youkai mama and a human mama. But based on what I’ve heard, it makes sense. If a Zashiki Warashi’s traits hinge on red or white, guiding her to choose the color of her own free will isn’t a bad idea. If we were talking about a human, I could just use this.”

She gently stroked the single horn growing from her forehead.

Its phosphorescent light provided a form of hypnosis.

This wasn’t an issue of good or evil and she was not empathizing with me. To her, manipulating someone else to one’s own end may have been a perfectly normal thing to do. It also might have helped that she herself was bound by the color blue.

“My thoughts on it are complex, but I can’t come up with a better idea,” said the Furutsubaki (Small). “And shooting down every idea while just sitting around won’t improve the situation. The only other options are to wait for the world to fall apart or to have someone else kill the Zashiki Warashi and I flatly refuse to do either of those. In that case, I can only bet on Jinnai Shinobu’s suggestion.”

“I call myself a guardian deity of children. A Zashiki Warashi is a

collection of the young children killed during famines, so I don't like the sound of treating her so crudely. But if you are shorthanded, just ask."

Then the Aburatori gave his approval.

The Nekomata used her back paw to scratch her ear while sitting on the tea table.

"I'm more worried about the old woman than the Zashiki Warashi. She hasn't had any time to rest since this unnatural age of mass consumption started. I'm willing to help if it will bring an end to that."

"I would love to have a chance to learn about Eastern Packages rather than Western magic," said Marguerite the Witch. "Plus, I'm nearly a refugee here, so I wouldn't want to lose this home."

"Well, you are my current master right now," said the Succubus. "With our contract, I won't stop you if you're willing to risk your life on this. A demon will continue obeying as long as it continues to benefit her."

The Yuki Onna was the last to speak.

"I don't really like doing anything to help that filthy Youkai…"

The deadly Youkai sighed as everyone focused on her.

A diamond dust atmosphere glittered around her and she continued as if having given up.

"But abandoning her here would probably greatly change Jinnai Shinobu's nature. It is truly unfortunate, but I do need to keep him in the form I want him…"

That settled it.

If we got down to who benefitted the most from this, it would of course be the Zashiki Warashi and me, but they would stick with me regardless. Creating a criminal Package was wrong. No matter what it actually did, the simple idea of "using" a Youkai could easily have filled them with disgust.

I could only bow my head to these idiots for gong along with my selfishness.

“Sorry, everyone!!”

“You need to proudly thank us instead. You’re going to take on the world for the girl you love, right? What about that requires curling up in shame?”

The Aburatori quickly corrected me.

When I raised my head, the Aoandon cut in.

“But what will you do? When it comes to knowledge and techniques, I would know a lot about Eastern stuff and Marguerite would probably know a lot about Western magic, but you’ll need more than that to build a Package. You need to observe the Youkai involved, accurately grasp her legends, distort or enlarge a portion to match your objective, build in symbols with specific physical items, and spiritually link them together. That requires at least a few dozen people and at most a few hundred. Do you have anyone you can rely on?”

“Sorry, but can you draw up the plans for the Package I want? I want to start recruiting help after we have the preliminary calculations done.”

“Fine, but where are you going to find these people? Surely you don’t mean the students at your school.”

I could not help but smile at that.

For the time being, I would cast aside all my principles and I could violate any taboo if it meant saving the world form this ruinous destiny and walking alongside the Zashiki Warashi once more.

So I said it.

“How many Youkai do you think I’ve dealt with in the past?”

“You don’t mean…?”

“I do.”

I had made up my mind. I would use everything I could. Giving up before I'd even tried, abandoning her in this crisis she was entirely unaware of, and then regretting it was the one thing I couldn't do.

So I would bear any sin and I would accept any punishment.

I couldn't hold up the pure goal of saving the Zashiki Warashi to dull people's conscience and guilt as I dragged them into something as crazy as a criminal Package while remaining clean myself.

I placed my left hand on my right shoulder and rotated my dominant arm.

And I suggested something I really should not have let myself do.

"Youkai seem to like me, so I'm gonna intentionally use that for once."

Part 3 (3rd person)

——It began inside Noukotsu Village.

"Hey, Umbrella, a letter just arrived."

“Hm? It’s for the Youkai directly rather than our master or his mother? How rare. Let’s take a look.”

“Oh, my. Do you think we should call for the Mayoiga too?”

“Yes, Lantern. Let’s call the new Fuguruma-Youbi as well. This is a good opportunity for her to get to know everyone.”

“The Jatai and Kosode-no-Te are saying they want in too.”

——An old-fashioned postcard with an attached reply card arrived at a distant seaside town.

“H-hey, that’s a Shichinin Misaki, isn’t it? Don’t you die if you meet one…?”

“Shh! It looks like they’re distracted by something… Are they reading a letter? Anyway, we need to run away!! Don’t give up hope! This’ll work out somehow!!”

“But there’s a mermaid over there. Don’t you gain immortality by eating their meat!?”

“And how are you going to cook up a mermaid that’s immune to physical attacks? And let me tell you something more fundamental: The people who get greedy at times like this are the ones who die! So run!!”

——Another postcard arrived at the even more distant land of Okinawa.

A Shisa held it in his mouth while running to a familiar Kijimuna for advice.

“I am Shisa. That Jinnai Shinobu guy is in trouble. What should we do?”

“… (sway sway)”

The lion-like decoration and the Chinese banyan tree continued speaking like that.

——A middle-aged man gave a postcard a concerned look at the tollbooth for the Four Mountains Junction where multiple highways intersected.

“A postcard for Zenmetsu Village? Are you serious? This thing isn’t cursed, is it?”

When he looked away for just a moment, a snake about as thick as a pinky finger grabbed the postcard in its mouth and carried it away.

It was a Toubyou.

They were hiding all around and quietly discussing the postcard, but the middle-aged man was oblivious.

“What, is that thing really cursed!? I’ve got the night shift coming up, you know!?”

——A few postcards were delivered via the special casino district of Goldmine Island.

The first one was sent to the Gold Crane Inn that Jinnai Shinobu had stayed at.

“Oh? A postcard from a guest. How unusual. And it even comes with a gift.”

“Let’s see… A Zashiki Warashi? Isn’t that like a relative of ours?”

“It’s more like they’re the main family and we’re the branch families.”

They were a Notabariko, an Usuhiki Warashi, and a Kura Bokko.

However, there was actually another Usuhiki Warashi on Goldmine Island.

“Kyah kyah☆”

Her mini-yukata was worn off the shoulders, so the girl seemed to be wearing a tube top dress as she ran around behind the casinos.

She held an identical postcard in her hand.

One of the postcards was sent from Goldmine Island to the United States via airmail.

Hasukawa Yumi frowned when she saw the strange postcard that slipped through the gaps in the naval blockade.

(To think he would use the world's top intelligence agency to relay a message…)

It was being sent to the Kechibi, Ubume, and Amanojaku at the base of the Package they had used.

If a Package was being made to interfere with the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi that was causing the global chaos, the CIA had a chance to add in whatever they might want.

Hasukawa Yumi thought for a moment about where to send the postcard.

(But unfortunately, I owe him one.)

She sighed just once.

She then erased a few records and sent the postcard along while making sure it would not be seen by Sid Clouds, her boss in name only.

Lastly, one was transferred to Shikoku from Kyushu's Goldmine Island.

"Tanuki, Fox, Badger. You have a postcard."

When the small girl called for them, three Youkai who looked like stuffed animals rushed out. It was a commonplace ready-built house, but a span of two generations from grandchild to grandmother lived there and it even had its own gardener, nurse, and bodyguard.

"Ohh, it's from Jinnai Shinobu! I haven't heard that name in a while!"

“My, my. But based on what it says, we can’t just rejoice about this…”

“Not a problem. I didn’t like being indebted to him anyway, so we should actually be thankful for this chance to repay him!”

——A postcard arrived for Ranzono Sachi at her juvenile hall.

When she read the text with the small centipede that crawled in through the gaps in the bars, her friend spoke to her.

“Sorry, Sachi. I know you’ll be lonely, but the time has come to repay that boy for what he did for us.”

“Hee hee. Even the picture books talk about your concept of repaying debts, so you don’t have to be so formal. More importantly, why not bring the others? The Tsuchigumo, the Nue, the Gama, the Uwabami, the Tesso, the Takebunkani, the Sarugami, and the Baku… Heh heh. They’re all really nice, so I’m sure they’ll help out.”

A small bird could be heard chirping, but it was nowhere to be seen.

“Heh heh. Yes, there was an Okuri-Suzume as well, wasn’t there?”

——Many a postcard were sent out over the country based on old memories.

“Oh, it’s been so long since I visited the Jinnai place… I never did get Shinobu-chan to carry me, so maybe I should stop by again!”

“Eh heh heh. I think it’s about time I approached Shinobu-chan about ‘that’.”

An Onbu-Obake and a Kaki Otoko were saying some dangerous things.

“Babuu.”

“This Ubu only ever says ‘babuu’ and ‘ogyah’, but the disobedient Tsuchigumo have a soft spot for abandoned kittens on a rainy day!!”

An Ubu and a Tsuchigumo moved their legs along.

“Heh. Ever since Shinobu-chan showed me a whole new world, I’ve always kept carbonated drinks in my head plate.”

“I am a Nopperabou, but I think people would actually be more surprised if I had eyes and a nose drawn on with black pen.”

A Kappa and Nopperabou were discussing something.

“Ho ho ho. He’s still such a spoiled child. Perhaps I, the Kyuubi, should pay him a visit.”

“C’mon, you wild fox, you just want to enjoy the festivities. As the Kuzunoha, I will make sure to train him properly.”

The Kyuubi and Kuzunoha.

“Yayyyyyyyyyyyyyy!! This is Tanuki☆Bayashiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! Today, I think I’ll introduce you all to a passionate fan letter we receeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeived!”

“I’m more than willing to help, but I don’t want him to expect too much. The Nurarihyon may be known as the leader of all Youkai, but I was originally just an Umibouzu.”

“I’m an Oni! Not many homes only do the bringing fortune inside part, so I need that shelter for February 3!!”

There were even five Tanuki, a Nurarihyon, and an Oni.

“Scurry scurry (Playing house with Shinobu-chan was fun.)”

“That’s right. A God of Poverty like me probably should have been worshipped there originally.”

“I don’t know what an Akaname can do, but I’ll head there if he wants it.”

A Kodoku, a God of Poverty, and an Akaname.

“I am a Nurikabe. I came running when I heard Shinobu-chan was in trouble.”

“I, an Ittan-Momen, am here too.”

“Then quit blocking the road! Do you want a Yagyou-san like me to

kick you with my headless horse!?”

“Now, now. Infighting won’t get us anywhere. How can you look a Dorotabou like me in the face and think otherwise?”

“I didn’t know a Dorotabou could walk on the road like normal. My single eye is quite shocked.”

A Nurikabe, an Ittan-Momen, a Yagyou-san, a Dorotabou, and a Hitotsume-Kozou.

——In neighboring Bozen City, a postcard arrived at the supposedly abandoned dog square.

“It hasn’t been long since that zombie outbreak, so what is it now?”

The creeped-out part-time delivery boy had considered throwing away the postcard countless times on the way, but he had been afraid that would get him cursed.

Then he saw a giant ball of light shoot up from the peak of the dormant volcano.

“Gyawah!! What!? Is that a UFO!!!???”

Few people knew the original form of the Youkai known as a Kasha.

——A few postcards were delivered to Shinobu’s Uncle Uchimaku Hayabusa rather than the Youkai.

“Hm? I’m supposed to deliver these to any Youkai I can think of?”

“Um, there was Zashou Island’s Funa Yuurei and Nure Onna, the Jinmensou from the Tsumada Mio stuff, and…well, we can ignore the Aoandon from Zenmetsu village and the Aburatori from the Tarot Girls 22 stuff, but there was also the Yamanba from the Ubasute Apartments, right?”

“Come to think of it, what ever happened to Toujou Miyabi’s Inugami?”

“Oh, right. And there was a Jorougumo too.”

——And a few more were delivered to Hishigami Mai.

“What kind of paranormal power did he use to deliver these to me when no one knows my real name!? Jinnai Shinobu’s gotten pretty good since I last saw him!!”

“Perhaps so. Munch, munch. This squid somen is delicious.”

“Hey, you damn Shikigami. Don’t tell me you’ve gotten so attached to him you’ve started leaking my information. First the detective and now the blond? How unfaithful are you!? I shouldn’t be having this much trouble controlling a Shikigami!”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. More importantly, what will you do?”

“Playing it safe would get Hyakki Yakou wrapped up in this…but it’s interesting that these came to me rather than the young lady. Is the boy already thinking about the power balance? *Or is he telling us to do this on our own?*”

“And?”

“I think I’ll go along with it and then watch to see what happens. The only Youkai I think we could use are the Monk from Amemura-chan’s family, the Inugami Gyoubu Tanuki and Osakabe-Hime from

that udon shop, the Kitsunebi and Tengu connected to Shinshou Hitsubatsu, and…huh? There really aren't that many."

"That's because you go around killing all of them."

"Anyway."

"Yes."

"*Can that young lady really pretend to not notice when her beloved Onii-chan is in danger?*"

——And lastly, back in the Jinnai home.

"Okay! We already have a Yuki Onna, a Nekomata, a Furutsubaki (Small), an Aburatori, and an Aoandon here."

"Um, master? Aren't you forgetting the Keseran-Pasaran and Azukiarai?"

"Heh heh. I'm glad to see you forgot about the big Furutsubaki. That's what she gets for stealing my snacks!"

"And can you really just shove a demon like the Succubus and a witch like Marguerite into the occult category?"

"Not a problem. From the moment we make a contract with a demon, our souls are shut out of heaven but we become a being who can bring about supposedly impossible phenomena in this life."

"But I want nothing to do with Tselika after all the torment she put me through. Come to think of it, what do we do about her? You should be able to contact her if you send a postcard to a coven in the catacombs."

"No!! Please don't do that!! I never want to see that Archdemon again!!"

There was little a single boy could do, but the path he had walked thus far had given him a definite answer.

He had done everything he could.

He felt definite progress each time.

But then…

“Eek!?”

He heard someone gasp.

There was “something” there that was gentle and yet stole away the entire advantage they seemed to have built up. It brought unease, fear, and a sense of danger. That invisible “something” spread through them all and seemed to reach the Youkai before a human like Shinobu. The five members of Tanuki☆Bayashi lay on their backs to play dead while the Umbrella and Lantern folded up and flattened their bodies of oiled paper.

The strange sense seemed to be arriving from the main entrance down the hall.

When Jinnai Shinobu gulped and hesitantly looked that way, he saw a familiar face there.

It was a girl of about ten with a purple kimono and black hair in a bob cut.

“Hafuri…?”

“Pardon my sudden visit, but surely you did not think Hyakki Yakou would fail to notice such a largescale movement.”

The Furutsubaki (Large) and Usuhiki Warashi clung to the boy’s waist.

They did not know much about the situation, so Hyakki Yakou may have looked like an organization that treated the disobedient with the attitude of the Yamato Imperial Court: kill them or force them to obey.

Shinobu exhaled, toyed with his hair, and patted the head of the white-haired Usuhiki Warashi clinging to his waist.

“I really didn’t want to get your help this time.”

“Yes, I understand your concern. If our predictions are correct, you are working to build up a strategy or Package to interfere with the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi. If Hyakki Yakou knew your methods, the risk of us including an unwanted backdoor would rise considerably. Before even worrying about the destiny of the world,

you likely wanted to avoid having a third party mess with your lover."

The Yuki Onna belatedly ran to the front entrance.

She covered her mouth with her kimono's sleeve, but a dangerous light filled her eyes.

"You have guts interfering at this delicate stage. We all have our own complicated reasons to try to save the Zashiki Warashi, so if

you do anything that would dull our resolve, I am prepared to take actio-…”

“What is with this short girl?”

“Mgyuh!?”

An exasperated-looking Hafuri pushed up on the Yuki Onna’s small nose with her index finger.

“Jinnai Shinobu, if you do intend to use this group, there is one thing you must consider first. Take command with a solid policy in mind. Even if you do intend it that way, the actions of any member of your organization can be taken as the intentions of the group as a whole.”

The Yuki Onna struggled and flailed her arms around, but Hafuri continued pushing on her nose and teasing her for nearly ten seconds before finally releasing her. The small jewels in her hair near the ears clacked together and produced a refreshing sound. The Yuki Onna collapsed exhausted to the floor and the nearby Tsuchigumo and Nurikabe trembled.

“H-hey, she’s one of the representative examples of a deadly Youkai, isn’t she? She’s something like the king of street fighting in the late-night back alleys, so how frightening does Hyakki Yakou have to be to defeat her so easily!? That girl must be like the gym teacher that patrols at night!!”

“I am a Nurikabe. Shinobu-chan, who is this girl? She’s giving off a scary aura, but she won’t bite, will she?”

Shinobu glanced back at the frightened Youkai hiding behind him and Hafuri breathed out through her nose.

She seemed to be used to this.

But at the same time, there was some envy in her eyes as she looked at Jinnai Shinobu…no, at that entire lineup.

“I have a suggestion.” Hafuri held a finger forward as Shinobu thought. “I would like to know what the Ver. 39…no, the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi is doing. But you do not want Hyakki Yakou to know about the Package you will be using to control her. …Thus, I will assist you as an individual, not as the leader of Hyakki Yakou. I will supply you with everything I have, but I will

not take back anything I see here. How does that sound?"

"…"

"Can you not believe a young girl's verbal promise?"

"No, I believe you. I mean, if you really wanted to kill her or capture her for experiments, she and I could have been *spirited away* before we left Mt. Boseki. I owe you for that. No, I guess I could say I trust you as a person thanks to that."

Hafuri looked a little surprised even though it had been her suggestion.

And Shinobu did not notice the change in her behavior.

"But that aside, is your position really that convenient. I understand how you feel, but will those around you really allow it?"

"Who do you think I am?"

"Majina's daughter and the leader of Hyakki Yakou. That's my entire point."

"And it was my entire point as well. Doesn't it seem extremely unusual that I appeared here alone without a single bodyguard?"

The girl in a purple kimono grinned in a way very unlike her and toyed with the jewels by her ears.

"My blood is a mixture of the pure blood of a Hyakki Yakou leader and the blood of a Zashiki Warashi. That has allowed me to control destiny, even if only slightly. It was enough to slip past the hundred generals and Top 5 of Hyakki Yakou. You can ignore that solid organization for now. It is unable to function properly for some reason."

But…

"Appeared here alone? I don't want to hear that from a little girl who showed up at my house with her mother. And with matching hair accessories too. You must be close."

"Eh? Huh? Ehh!? Mother!!"

Hafuri was confused at first, but she finally caught on after looking behind her. Yes, a sexy Youkai in a white yukata who had an almost

ghostly lack of presence was standing right behind her.

It was Mei.

Without speaking a word, she looked Shinobu in the eye and silently nodded. She also gently rubbed her daughter's head.

Meanwhile, Hafuri was anything but peaceful.

"How? What? Eh? But… Weren't you confined to Hyakki Yakou's most strictly guarded cell!?"

"I really doubt normal logic works with them. It feels like they can directly mess with the world's destiny. Besides, settling down and leaving when they want is just what a Zashiki Warashi does."

"B-but still!"

"More importantly, our Yukari apparently escaped Hyakki Yakou over a century ago. I think I've heard that was your golden age or something, so there's already a precedent when things would have been even harder."

"That's not the point!! Why did you leave your cell and come all this way, mother? More specifically, was it to contact Jinnai Shinobu!? Depending on your answer, I might have to do everything I can to stop you as your daughter!!"

Hafuri snapped at her mother, but Mei simply patted her daughter's head some more.

But…

"This means you got into Noukotsu Village just fine, doesn't it?"

"Y-yes."

"Yukari didn't call for you, but you forced your way in. And it worked…"

Could it be? wondered Shinobu.

He may have been too conceited. It may not have been his own doing that had allowed all these Youkai to conveniently gather, that had prevented coincidences that sounded like jokes from getting in the way, and that had kept the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi's ruinous destiny from intercepting them. Hafuri and Mei may have

briefly diverted Yukari's power that Majina had analyzed as outdoing the Ver. 40's during its brief spikes.

Shinobu had no way of seeing destiny.

He had no idea how exactly its threads were tangled together.

But could it be…?

"What will you do?"

The Nekomata had walked up to his feet at some point and she asked him that question.

Shinobu intentionally sighed.

"Well…"

After that word, he faced his inner thoughts again.

He had to remember his own catchphrase.

He muttered it below his breath: *I can get along with any Youkai. You decided that already, Jinnai Shinobu.*

So…

"Understood. You aren't Hyakki Yakou's leader right now. You're just an individual and one of 'us'. Is that okay?"

This time, Jinnai Shinobu had the necessary power in hand as he smiled and looked across them all.

It really was like the crude drawing on that construction paper.

Everyone had gathered at the entrance at some point.

There was no division between human and Youkai. They all smiled together as a single group.

At first, he had thought about having them all hold hands in a ring like a scene from an adolescent drama, but there were too many of them to do that now.

In other words…

"*I'm counting on you, Jinnai Shinobu's Hyakki Yakou*! We don't need

to take over the world and immortality doesn't matter!! I only want one thing: give me your help to save the girl I've fallen for and to keep her from becoming a villain!!"

For a brief time, that boy would be the leader of one hundred monsters.

The world did not matter to them.

The part of the world in the light of day and the part of the world hidden by shadows was no concern of theirs.

They had just one goal: protecting that boy's beloved girl from every unreasonable thing the world could throw at her.

Part 4 (Jinnai Shinobu)

What I would use was simple.

I could get it all in half a day with a few clicks on an online shopping site.

A red pen, a compass, a hand mirror, a plastic ruler, a glass cutter, a cardboard tube, thin red paper, an origami set, a drill, scissors, a utility knife, glue, masking tape, and lastly some crepe paper to make it look nice.

"A kaleidoscope?"

I did as I was told by using the ruler to mark the hand mirror and then I grabbed the glass cutter. The tool looked like a tiny version of a pizza cutter.

"It doesn't have any cables or wireless capabilities, so can it really act as the core of a Package?"

"Anything can as long as it has the proper symbolism."

Hafuri answered me with a composed voice.

Next, the Aoandon readily agreed.

"To put it another way, what were the cores of the Packages you've

seen already? Weren't the blatantly suspicious ones the exceptions?"

She had a point.

When I thought about it, I realize it had all been things like the sanatorium user agreement or a toy revolver. They didn't have to be digital and high-tech and they didn't have to be filled with strange occultism either.

I cut the mirror in thirds and placed them together into a triangular prism. The mirrored side was on the inside. Then I filled the gaps with glue and held them together with masking tape until the glue could dry.

"We have a USB fan, don't we? Would that help it dry faster?"

"No, any unnatural interference will create 'lumps'. It's best to let it dry naturally. Just leave it be. Rushing this will only lead to mistakes."

Hafuri simply narrowed her eyes and watched me work. She would say something if I messed up, but she generally just observed without giving any instructions. That may have been what she judged to be "helping as an individual but not as Hyakki Yakou".

"The key to this Package is the color deception. It makes red into white and white into red. It doesn't matter if it's complete sophistry; we still win if we can reverse the perception of those colors. Is that much okay?"

"Well, I was the one to suggest it."

I used the compass to draw a perfect circle on the cardboard and used the utility knife to cut along the line. I had to open a hole in the center…but I decided I didn't need the drill for that. I used the point of the compass to directly tear through.

On the Aoandon's instructions, I placed the thin red paper on top of that.

"A kaleidoscope has two holes. One to peer inside and one to let light in. If you place the thin red paper over the light opening, the inside of the kaleidoscope will be red."

"I see, I see."

I pulled some red paper from the origami set.

It required patience, but I cut it up with the scissors. They were basically square dots or chips only a few millimeters long. The math worked out to 108 of them in all.

“Place white paper inside and it will be dyed red. You’re looking at white, but you see red. That’s stage one.”

After making sure the quick-drying glue had dried, I removed the tape from the triangular prism.

Hafuri sighed quietly.

“It looks fine.”

“It does.”

I placed the mirror part inside the cardboard tube and glued it inside. The bottom was covered by the circular lid of thin red paper.

I then poured the dots and chips of origami paper inside.

“But even if they’re seeing red, someone who knows the trick will assume they’re really looking at white.”

The Aoandon grabbed the rest of the origami set and flipped the paper over.

The front side was colorful, but the back was pure white.

In other words…

“But in truth, the dots are red on one side and white on the other. That means no one knows what color the dots inside the kaleidoscope really are. The ones you think are actually white might really be red. It might be something like that cat in the box. Anyway, that completes stage two. This one kaleidoscope turns red into white and white into red.”

That just left the details.

I cut a circle in the cardboard for a large peephole. It would look more the part with glass covering that hole, but I was afraid an amateur like me would leave some small fragments behind if I tried to do that with the glass cutter. That was especially scary with something you held to your eye. Instead, I cut off a piece of the

clear cellophane bag the origami set had come in. After placing that cover over the remaining upper end, I covered the side of the cardboard tube with flower-print crepe paper I thought the Zashiki Warashi would like.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime endeavor, yet it looked kind of awkward.

But maybe that was for the best.

The “We’re All Friends” construction paper was the same and I knew something had definitely been saved by that.

The Aoandon reached out and traced her finger along the outside.

“That completes the core.”

“But I can’t imagine how we’re going to link this kaleidoscope with the Zashiki Warashi. Does she just have to carry it around with her everywhere?”

“You can leave those tricky calculations to the witch. A Package isn’t something a single person can do, remember?”

“Yes, and my mother Mei and I are here to watch over things. If there is a discrepancy between the Western and Eastern methods, we can correct it for compatibility.”

“Is that how it works?” I wondered while glancing over.

The Youkai were moving all about through the thatch-roof house.

“Heave-ho, heave-ho!”

“Sigh. This is more heavy labor than I was expecting…”

“We have to make adjustments all over and we have to get it done before nightfall! Even if we got permission to head out, our master will worry if we’re out too late!!”

I asked the Aoandon a question while watching the Umbrella and Lantern’s mouths moving.

“What are they doing? Aren’t they just renovating the house!?”

“We’ll do all the detailed calculations, so don’t worry about it.”

“A Zashiki Warashi settles down in a house, so they have a strong connection to the house. Making adjustments to that house is the easiest way of altering her bodily structure. I know it isn’t exactly a happy memory, but do you remember what happened in that Fuuka Village hotel? The hotel’s blueprints were used to interfere with the Zashiki Warashi then too.”

“Of course, we’re choosing areas that don’t move much so you humans won’t mess with this when you make your own renovations.”

I heard a commotion from the ceiling, but this did not sound like more renovations.

“Oh, honestly!! The attic is my territory! You don’t have anywhere else to stay? I don’t care! Go sleep in a tree or below the floor!!”

I called out to her before an actual fight broke out.

“Succubus, we have around a hundred Youkai in here now, so be a little flexible. Everyone’s making compromises.”

“Oh, that’s just mean!! You’re my master, so I can’t save face if you say that! And there’s no stopping them all now!!”

I saw a bunch of stuffed animal-like Youkai rushing up the stairs. From the look of things, they would be fighting over food too.

“So how long is this going to take? We’re generally welcome to Youkai visitors, but I think my dad will get suspicious if a hundred of them stick around for too long.”

“It won’t take that long. Although the trick will be to have the Akaname and Shichinin Misaki work while hiding from the humans.”

With that comment, the Aoandon spread a map out on the tea table. Hafuri filled it in with pink highlighter while checking on something. It was a map of my house and she seemed to be marking the areas where the work was complete. It was at about a third. She drew in what looked like wiring, but I wasn’t sure what that meant.

“Shinobu.”

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata slipped past all the working Youkai to approach me. She had to have no idea what was going

on. In fact, she didn't even know what her very existence was doing to the world. Her perception was shifted out of place. She looked around skeptically before looking straight at me.

"What is all this? I've never seen so many different Youkai in here. This is technically my territory, but there's clearly some other Zashiki Warashi here."

"What's with you, Yukari? Are you jealous having all these Youkai around? Come to think of it, there are a lot of pretty good looking ones like the Nure Onna, Jorougumo, and Kosode-no-Te."

"…"

"Eh? Seriously? That's seriously why you're upset? Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!! Don't scratch me! Don't scratch me all over! Are you like a pet cat that gets upset as soon as it has kittens!?"

We started playing around like that, but I could tell Hafuri and the Aoandon were slowly narrowing their eyes.

That's right.

At this point, nothing was meaningless. We were trying to build a Package that would restrain the ruinous power of the Ver. 39. That power could bend the entire world's destiny, so it could easily detect something like this. And for better or for worse, it would use destiny to crush our efforts. The rails switched over too seamlessly to notice and we were thrown into the labyrinth. We were not even allowed to choose to fight or not. We were simply diverted from the main track of destiny and all our efforts were ruined.

Even the Zashiki Warashi's own will may have been irrelevant.

The ruinous power may have been manipulating her as well.

And if what the Aburatori and Aoandon said was accurate, then Noukotsu Village was surrounded by an invisible labyrinth and anyone who would get in the Ver. 39's way (whether they meant harm or not) would be unable to approach. Even so, the hundred Youkai of my Hyakki Yakou had gathered here.

That of course had likely been helped by my special trait to gather Youkai as well as Hafuri and Mei's ability to bend destiny as white Zashiki Warashi.

But if that was enough to utterly defeat the Ver. 39, then we wouldn't need to build such a major Package and Majina wouldn't have had to make himself a great criminal by causing a zombie outbreak.

In other words, all of this was insignificant.

The source of all fortune and misfortune was the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.

As the Ver. 39, she was obstructing us as the Ver. 39, but as a Zashiki Warashi, she was trying to welcome my guests.

Something was diverging inside her as well.

I could not ignore that power.

If that divergence continued, I could not even guess what would happen. She might become a puppet of the Ver. 39 or her body might split in two.

"Don't worry."

I swallowed everything inside my chest.

I then embraced my girlfriend, gently rubbed her head, and softly repeated myself.

"There's nothing to worry about. I promise you I won't let anything you care about be destroyed."

It did not matter if those words could not reach her within the bonds of the Ver. 39.

Part 5 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Chief Superintendent Mishima said it was urgent and called me to a large harbor region in the Tokyo subcenter.

"I'm surprised you showed up when they could 'accidentally' send a missile flying this way any day now, Mystery Freak."

"You too, detective. I don't think many civil servants would keep

working once they aren't getting paid."

One of us was a plain man in a cheap suit and coat and the other was a showy girl decorated with ribbons wrapped around her body and a top and miniskirt made to look like whipped cream and chocolate.

We exchanged a glance and both laughed as if we couldn't believe it.

The world was ending.

It was a little unclear if it was going to end soon or if it already had and no one had noticed, but according to the economic and investment experts, we had long since passed the point of no return.

The core of it all was the Zashiki Warashi and the only one that could stop it was my nephew Shinobu.

It sounded like a joke, but all my phone calls and emails mysteriously couldn't get through to him. The trains and planes were all conveniently having trouble. I considered getting a rental car, but I was stopped by the ultimate "coincidence" of growing hesitant because I was afraid of getting into an accident on my own.

There was nothing we could do.

We could only wait for whatever result Shinobu and the Zashiki Warashi brought.

That said, I couldn't just hole up in my room and pull the blanket over my head. After all, I was a police officer and problems both big and small were cropping up everywhere.

We could not stand in the center, but Shinobu could not reach the outer edges.

We each had our job. I would be lying if I said it wasn't frustrating, but finding something I could do myself was much more important and meaningful.

That way I could prevent as much unnecessary damage as possible.

"Let's go."

"Right."

The city subcenter's coast was near Hachi TV where my old upperclassman Atou worked, but we had not arrived at a waterfront office building or luxury apartment.

It was a cruise ship moored in the harbor.

"The Yakata-II. We haven't seen it since Goldmine Island, detective. We never got to go inside then, though."

"Huh? But didn't something happen to that cruise ship at the end of all that…?"

At any rate, the Mystery Freak and I entered the ship. Fortunately, there was no dress code.

Mishima-san was enjoying some wagyu teppanyaki in the ship's three-star restaurant. Although it was more like the food area of a larger party space than it was a dedicated restaurant.

"Hi there, Uchimaku-kun. Over here, over here."

"What are you doing? Didn't you say this was urgent?"

"Yes, but just like in hotels, I can't help but go get some teppanyaki. It's a lot like the urge to dive into a bed when you see one."

That man in his fancy suit was living it up in his bachelorhood even more than me. He was really old enough to settle down too. And he was quite energetic about the meat when even the global burger shops were having trouble after the zombie outbreak.

"Were you thinking something rude?"

"No, not really. Now, about this cruise ship…"

"That's right, Hayabusa-kun. You might not know all the details since you weren't directly involved, but it had a hole in the bottom. It's unclear whether it was the CIA or the Hishigami Woman that did it, though."

"…"

"No need to be so nervous. Only the ballast tank was taken out, so it won't sink as long as the inspection hatch is closed. It's still careless to have 1700 lives riding on that, though."

Things had gone beyond that.

They were intentionally hiding it. They were keeping quiet to make money, safety be damned.

They really were worshiping money.

“Troublesome, isn’t it? And we can’t get after them for it when all the related agencies have closed up shop. I might be at a wagyu teppanyaki place, but I actually like the abalone steak the best. Although I’m skeptical whether this is Intellectual Village meat like they claim.”

“So the magic trick using the network’s bonds is producing all sorts of moral hazards, is it?”

“I have something to discuss concerning that. Kotemitsu-san was supposed to give the details, but…hm, how should I put it? Her fights with her sister are pretty intense. I can’t exactly enjoy the company of the two beauties like this.”

“Yeah, that is what’ll happen if you shove Madoka and Seika into the same trading room. It’s like trying to raise a cobra and a mongoose together.”

Enbi gave her exasperated comment while dressed in her red ribbons, whipped cream and chocolate top and miniskirt, wafer ribbon tie, and shortcake hat on the side of her head.

A moment later, a door was thrown noisily open. I looked over and saw a square opening in the thick wall where there had been no sign of a door before. A woman and a girl stepped out.

It was college-aged Seika of the main Kotemitsu family and Shinobu’s classmate Madoka-chan.

“I can’t believe you would start selling there!! Why would you make manual changes when the autonomous investment program can see the optimal move!? You don’t gain anything besides stroking your own ego when you succeed based on your own decision!!”

“I think you rely too much on the machine. Investing is about reading the interactions of people’s hearts. Even if programs wearing the skins of user accounts are running rampant these days, the thoughts of the people building their algorithms will still affect things. You don’t understand the Kotemitsu style at all, Miss Error.”

“It pisses me off that you sum everything up using internet terminology! Is that in style these days? It wasn’t that long ago you used chess terminology to describe the family’s system!!”

“Noise that doesn’t fit the file format will not even reach my ears. If you wish to speak with me, then learn the Kotemitsu format first.”

“And why are you wearing that showy marching band outfit, you flat old lady!?”

“!! Mishima tricked me by saying this was a costume party!”

Mishima-san waved at me without looking back.

“Do something about this, Uchimaku-kun. You have no trouble going out for karaoke with a middle school girl, so you’re my final hope here.”

“I had a very good reason for that!! I just wanted a soundproof room for-…”

“That’s right. The detective dragged this innocent little girl into a private room where no one could see us or hear me scream.”

“It was so we could discuss strategy, you idiot!! That case had to do with the embassy, so we had no choice but to give up on more direct methods!!”

Seeing others behaving badly seemed to help people correct their own behavior. The Kotemitsu Sisters’ argument had heated up so much, but they calmed down when they saw our commotion.

Mishima-san sounded impressed as he chowed down on an abalone steak that used the large shell as a plate and was covered in a special sauce made from butter and its innards.

“Well done, Uchimaku-kun. You handled that so well I feel silly for wasting three hours with that. They say it’s best to go to the specialists and it looks like I should just leave all the young girls to you.”

“Who the hell is secretly manipulating the rails of my destiny!?”

I cried out while afraid of some invisible threads I felt were wrapped all around my body, but the rich bachelor wiped his mouth with a napkin and handed a black card to the waiter. He politely declined any dessert, finished paying, and guided me to the previous hidden room with a fancy coat in hand.

“The Yakata-II was built for the wealthy, so it has a satellite connection and card company servers linked to the casino and trading rooms. That makes it a perfect base for us.”

“But why use such a dangerous ship? There are plenty of nice rooms on the coast you could use.”

Seika-san answered my natural question.

“Those are so full of the newly rich that there won’t be an opening for years. It’s everyone from grade schoolers to housewives and even the elderly who have too much free time and pension money. Do you know what the most popular thing to get training in is these days? It’s apparently the investment business by a wide margin.”

“…”

Ugh.

I still only saw investing as another word for gambling, so this new era seemed absolutely insane to me. I shuddered just thinking about people who couldn’t connect a computer to a printer in computer class diving into a world where they could blow a hundred million yen in a ten thousandth of a second, but that probably just meant I was too set in my ways.

Then again, feeling that way was an important thing now.

The hidden room was the size of two school classrooms. Two chairs sat back-to-back in the center. In all 360 degrees, the walls, ceiling, and floor were covered with flat-screen monitors supported by the kind of arms used for desk lamps.

Countless numbers and graphs moved about wildly on the screens.

There was data on wars, disasters, mergers, buyouts, weather forecasts, and even hamburger prices in different countries. There were clusters of windows displaying every single online news article that could even slightly affect the stock or foreign exchange market.

I just felt overwhelmed.

You could recognize a single ant as an insect, but once there was a thousand or ten thousand of them, they looked like a single wriggling mass or monster. This provided the same sort of pressure.

“Where am I even supposed to focus?”

“I think the trick is to view it all at once without focusing.”

Madoka-chan casually answered me in her sailor uniform. She did not sound entirely confident in her answer because it was such a natural thing to her that she might as well have been explaining

how to breathe or blink.

“So what’s the problem?”

“This.” Mishima-san turned one of the arm-mounted flat screen monitors my way. “The national natural convenience stores I mentioned before are just barely being contained. They use a new cold storage service to transport perishables without damaging them, but Madoka-chan and Seika-san targeted that by claiming it violates another company’s patent. That said, it’s really just buying time. The moral hazard itself is continuing to spread as data. It won’t be long before this kind of thing is considered normal and a few of the people’s threads have already burned away. Look.”

“…”

“The people who gained a small fortune with the bonds magic trick are starting to reach elsewhere. They have nothing better to do since the natural convenience stores have stalled.”

“Um, what is this? They’re buying land on the moon and mars?”

The Mystery Freak sounded confused and Madoka-chan shrugged.

“If you can put a price tag on it and sell it, it doesn’t matter what it is. Do you know why pure gold and platinum are so valuable? Because there are a lot of people who find that convenient. And in this case, land on the moon and mars can’t fall victim to land speculation, can’t jump in value due to a sudden railroad expansion, can’t fall into a fight over sun exposure rights due to a high-rise building, and can’t have protestors stage a sit-in. And unlike gold and diamonds, thieves can’t run off with it. Once it has a price tag, there is no more stable savings box.”

“Plus, there are no international or national laws concerning the land of other astronomical bodies. Setting aside how effective it is, there’s no problem with buying and selling this land as data. These days, avatars in virtual space open up shops and sell digital products for digital money. Even if you can’t reach it, it might actually be a plus that there’s something physical attached to the deal.”

At this rate, they were probably going to pour a bunch of money into the candy of some nonexistent fantasy land.

I was utterly exasperated and Mishima-san showed me yet another

window.

“But once all the land on the moon and mars has been sold off, those greedy people will move onto another market. This one’s growing pretty hot right now. It’s also space-related.”

“The satellite debris business?”

“Detective, if you include the ones of unknown nationality, there are currently one to two thousand satellites in operation. But their average length of durability – that is, their lifespan – is between five and ten years. And what do you think happens to a satellite that’s role has ended?”

“Well, isn’t it sent into the atmosphere to burn up on reentry?”

“With the controllable ones, yes.” Seika-san slowly sighed. “But when control is lost due to a malfunction, that can’t happen. There are an estimated seven to eight thousand ‘empty shells’ orbiting the earth. Include the separated parts, separated paint fragments, and small debris, and it’s rumored to be more like four to thirty million.”

The estimated range had grown quite a bit.

That must have shown how little anyone knew about it.

“So they’ve placed price tags on the trash orbiting the earth and acting like it’s as valuable as diamonds or platinum?”

“At first, but things have changed.”

Mishima-san held out the finishing blow.

It said the following:

Don’t let the wealth gather at the top!! Help us distribute it to everyone!!

We have started this group to bring an end to the satellite debris business that unfairly manipulates the value of money using formless economic activity. With help from civilians, we have begun developing a special type of small satellite. It is loaded with explosives and it detonates near the valuable debris floating in orbit to send that debris into the atmosphere.

Satellite destroying satellites, aka killer satellites, are banned, you say?

That treaty was signed between nations, so it does not apply to a borderless civilian nonprofit like us.

Doesn't it seem odd to all of you?

Don't you think the people diligently working up a sweat at their jobs should be making money too?

If the country refuses to do anything about it, then civilians like us must act in their stead.

We are not asking for monetary support. It can be message boards, blogs, SNSs, or whatever else, but please explain to everyone that what we are doing is right. The support of public opinion can't be taken lightly. Your support will be our greatest strength.

Hishigami General
Trading Group

"What…the hell?"

I could not help but groan.

When I saw the name Hishigami, I glanced over at the Mystery Freak.

The twintail girl quietly bit her lip.

"This is the problem with those Hishigami Men. They always go on and on about being reasonable, but as soon as what the country or the world considers reasonable becomes distorted, they raise the white flag."

"Is this even possible? You mean it isn't someone pretending to be them!? But the Hishigami Group is an international corporation with over two hundred thousand employees! Flip through the channels during primetime and you'll see their ads pretty much everywhere!!"

"Those men will do anything if the concept of 'reasonable' has been distorted. Do you need to check a history textbook to know who it was that first started releasing tanks and fighters during wartime?"

“But still…”

Explosives on civilian satellites? Sending them to space and detonating them? Treaties between nations didn’t matter for individuals and civilians? That nonsense would never work. A rocket turned into a weapon was the very definition of a missile. If individuals and civilians used that without the military’s management, others would fight back. This seemed to be on the Hishigami Group’s website, but where were their headquarters located? If it was in Japan, then weren’t they essentially announcing to the international community that our island nation was a dangerous place that couldn’t manage its own ballistic missiles and could start firing them like crazy at any moment!?

“You couldn’t find a greater moral hazard, could you?” Mishima-san sounded disgusted too. “And there are two frightening aspects to this. First, the fact that the police have shut down and can’t act even with this nonsense going on. And second, that a fair number of people are agreeing with this.”

“…”

“…”

What look did I have on my face? It was probably the same as the one on the Mystery Freak’s face next to me.

A short text SNS said the following:

“Frappe: What’s wrong with that? I don’t really have anything against them, but it’s important to keep things in motion. Preventing stagnation will make everyone happy, so we need to give the economy a shot in the arm like this.”

“Round: I’ve got more news! It seems Hishigami is focusing a lot on the angle of entry. That way the abandoned satellites that are nearly whole can survive reentry and reach the surface. We can get all the rare earths we want from them. Yahoo!”

“House Mouse 21: It really is a redistribution of wealth. C’mon, we need even more of this. Really, having just a small part of the population gaining so much using fictional price tags was what made no sense. Now we’ll have jewels raining down across the globe. What a wonderful age we live in.”

No matter how much we scrolled, there were always more new

messages.

Plus, the opinions were gathering in single direction. Out of the hundreds and thousands of short posts, there was not a single real rebuttal.

It felt like these were the residents of some creepy dictatorship.

“Amazing, isn’t it? This isn’t even an anonymous message board. Of course, the anonymity of those message boards only gets you so far, but still. They aren’t even trying to hide their identity with proxies. I’m impressed they can post this kind of thing under their own screennames.”

Madoka-chan really did sound impressed.

These kinds of posts would normally lead to suicidal levels of embarrassment, but no one seemed to care. No one was even flaming them. The moral hazards had already made it that far into the normal functioning of the world.

But not even that was the core of the problem.

“But detective, isn’t this really bad? I mean, whole satellites raining down? Wait just a second there. Satellites are designed to burn up on reentry, so they tend to have some pretty dangerous things inside. They tend to use nuclear batteries and the kind of rocket fuel that burns the skin on contact!”

“And that will be raining down across Japan…no, across the world…?”

The Intellectual Village brand name would collapse instantly.

In fact, the entire globe would be contaminated!

“The natural convenience stores that led to this new age must be panicking. If that ultra-valuable brand-name is destroyed, their stores lose all meaning. And it’s too late to try to stop each individual one now. Plus, there’s no guarantee this is the only moral hazard. At this rate, they’re sure to start popping up like bamboo shoots after a rain.” Mishima-san looked to the screen. “So let’s start a war void of morals using this network that connects the world. What can we buy and sell, what can we say, and what online news can we use to bring an end to this worst case scenario? That’s what I want all of you to think about.”

Part 6 (3rd person)

While the Package was being constructed, the Yuki Onna walked out into the yard, took a ladder from the shed, and placed it against the wall of the house.

“Eh heh heh.”

When she heard a bewitching female laugh, a tremor ran down her spine.

She could not believe it. She simply could not believe it.

When the short girl fearfully turned around with a cold sweat dripping down her face, she saw a most unwelcome vision.

“M-Mizore!? And Hadare!?”

She had no idea when they had arrived, but two similarly dressed Yuki Onna had locked onto her. They were old friends who had lived on the same mountain as her, but the Yuki Onna of the Jinnai household had a reason to be nervous.

Mizore, who had spiral glasses and two braids, spoke up hesitantly.

“H-Hyou-chan, we were all worried about you when you suddenly left the mountain in the heat of midsummer. We hadn’t heard anything from you since you said you were going to find a human husband, so we thought you might have ended up like a popsicle dropped on the asphalt during summer break.”

“Gulp…!?”

“And the seasons have finally changed, so we left to search for you. I’m glad you’re doing well. So Hyou-chan, did you meet a lovely person?”

Those 100% well-intentioned words stabbed into the Yuki Onna’s chest in rapid succession.

It was like going to a class reunion and finding out you alone had made no progress whatsoever.

(Gh-ghhh! Why did they have to show up now? …Oh, is this the

Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi's interference that Jinnai Shinobu was talking about? Is her power *shifting destiny off track*? I really want to kill her right now…)

Some steam started rising from her due to the pressure, but then the Yuki Onna named Hadare opened her mouth. She was a sexy woman with her light blue hair worn up.

"Heh heh heh. I told her you would be fine. I mean, you're such an unusual Yuki Onna, Hyou. You can't even make proper snow, yet you can bring down blocks of ice during the summer. Hee hee. You just don't have the elegance of the snowscape."

"Kh. Why you…!!"

"So how did it go? The Yuki Onna is the standard example of a beautiful Youkai, so after wandering around down here for about half a year, surrrrrely you've managed to snag at least one guy. Right, Hyou?"

Hadare's confidence came from what she held in her arms.

Yes, she was a Yuki Onna that came with a baby.

Was it derived from the Ubume or had a similar story come about by coincidence? The white Yuki Onna was generally thought of as a symbol of virginity, but there were some that held a baby. They were a deadly Youkai that asked travelers to hold their baby and, if the traveler agreed, would crush them as the baby gradually grew heavier and heavier. Just like with the Onbu-Obake, it was a stereotypical Japanese ghost story of destroying oneself by taking on a burden.

Of course, one could not make a baby on their own.

Nothing could apply greater pressure on a marriage-seeking Youkai.

"She was just dying to show her to you, Hyou-chan. Her name is Sou-chan and it's spelled with the character for frost. Isn't she cute?"

"Sh-shut up! I did not miss her at all!! And I was really planning to turn that guy into crushed ice…"

"Hyou-chan, don't you think we did a wonderful thing by stopping her?"

While plain Mizore wore spiral glasses and had a flat chest, the steam weakening effect gave her a dynamite body when she stepped inside an open-air hot spring. The hot water would make her dizzy, but since that made her harmless, beautiful, and carefree, she was ranked third or fourth on a list of Yuki Onna that skiers wanted to run across. Any old story or drama that included a silly Yuki Onna that could not seem to kill anyone and always failed was generally based on her.

And as the pressure bore down on her, Yuki Onna Hyou gathered all her strength and began fighting back.

“Heh…heh heh heh. What are you talking about? Of course I’m super popular. I have so many to choose from I might as well have my own harem. I was just late in reporting back to you because I was having trouble choosing from them all.”

“Ah ha ha! Of course. A Yuki Onna can capture a husband in a single ski season, so it would be pathetic if you couldn’t get a single guy after freely wandering around for half a year!! By the way, my husband runs an IT startup and owns the entire top floor of a Roppongi apartment building. He’s super rich from that bond trading that’s popular these days!! But I’m a Youkai, right? So I don’t like the city air much and I’ve had to reject his invitations even if it is a luxury apartment. Instead, I’ve settled down in a Karuizawa mountain villa. Oh, sorry about getting sidetracked on my boring old self. So what kind of person is your man? What’s his salary? I want to hear all about your luxurious and happy new life. Heh heh heh.”

“Y-y-y-y-you’ll be shocked when you hear it. But, um…oh, right! This would be a little much for a baby, so I will restrain myself for now. I’m definitely not making excuses. This is for your sake.”

“Ehh? That’s amazing, Hyou-chan!”

The spiral glasses provided dreadful supporting fire by innocently placing a hand over her mouth with that comment. The Yuki Onna was going to have to keep up the act until the end of the world now.

Steam started rising from her head as she continued.

“H-he is incredibly bold, and…”

“Yes, yes?”

“He’s so nice he invited me into his basement ice room when the summer heat was getting to me…”

“Oh?”

“I-I can’t even imagine living without him anymore…ah, this is too embarrassing! I’m melting. My body is melting!!”

She seemed to have reached her limit.

White steam burst from the already small Yuki Onna’s body as if she had used a ninja smokescreen technique. Mizore coughed and wiped off her steamed-up spiral glasses before putting them back on.

Then she placed a hand over her mouth.

“Huh? Where’d Hyou-chan go?”

“Heh heh heh. Oh ho ho ho ho!! The little girl couldn’t stand it any longer, so she ran off! Lie all you want, you can always smell the desperation in a bachelorette!!”

Hadare laughed loudly while holding the baby that symbolized a happy life while Mizore remained oblivious. They looked around to see where the other Yuki Onna had hidden and then they glanced to the open door of the shed.

They peered inside without actually going in.

“She isn’t here, Hadare-chan.”

“Honestly. This is what happens when you try to tell a blatantly made-up-…”

Hadare trailed off as she recalled Hyou mentioning her man introducing her to a basement ice room when the summer heat had gotten to her.

“Hm? Hmm? Wait. Does that mean Hyou was dizzily collapsed on the side of the road and he took her home to his private basement for a honeymoon?”

“Hadare-chan, why are you fidgeting?”

“N-no!?”

Hadare frantically shook her head, but it still bothered her. Was there maybe an entrance somewhere in the floor in the shed's darkness and did it maybe hide some stairs down into a basement?

Her eyes were naturally drawn in that direction and then she spotted something.

Some rope was sitting in the back of the shed.

"Wait!!"

"Eek!?"

"No, no, no. That doesn't mean…that doesn't mean anything. There are all sorts of ways to use rope and a shed is a perfectly normal place to store it. It doesn't mean that short girl has entered a dangerous territory not even I've-…"

She came to a stop when she saw something else.

She spotted a strange silhouette in the back of the shed.

Yes.

It seemed to be made from several different pieces of wood. It had four legs like a table, but the top was not a flat surface. The center line rose to a point like a doghouse roof. And it was quite a point too. The overall silhouette did look something like a simplified version of an animal, just like some kind of playground equipment.

Now, then.

It was made of wood.

The back was a pointed triangle.

And it was modeled after an animal…specifically, a horse.

What was such a device called?

"H-h-heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!? Is this the legendary…the legendary…ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

"D-don't yell, Hadare-chan! You're making your baby cry!!"

Hearing the commotion the two Yuki Onna caused as they ran off, Shinobu's small grandmother arrived with a confused look.

However, the source of the noise had already left.

“?”

The shed door had been left carelessly open, so she approached to close it.

Then she spotted something inside that she had not seen in a long time.

“Oh, we haven’t used the fish drying rack in a while. I should drag that back out once the sun blesses us with its presence again.”

Part 7 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Hm?

Did I just hear some screaming out in the yard?

That bothered me, but I had my hands full in the hallway.

Yes.

The large and small Furutsubaki duo was fighting.

“I am far more useful to Jinnai Shinobu. I’m taller, so I can reach things.”

“Why you…! You’re only two millimeters taller!!”

“I don’t want to hear anything from an inelegant and flat-chested child.”

“I’ll break your trunk and eradicate your roots!!”

They started grabbing at each other which pulled their kiminos from their bodies in a number of places, so I stopped them.

I was pretty sure this was another example of interference.

“You be the judge! Jinnai Shinobu, you be the judge!! Which one of us has the better transformation!?”

“Mh. How exactly will he judge that?”

“It’s about who’s more human-like, so it’s a softness competition! We’ll have him feel our softness!!”

“Okay, but let’s make this thorough. No spot is off limits.”

“Ah, stop that, you idiots! The look in Yukari’s eyes is really scaring me!! Oh, god! She’s coming this way!!”

This had to be the Ver. 39 detecting the Package preparations and *shifting destiny off track* to interfere, so why was the Zashiki Warashi herself so jealous that she seemed to be growing horns!? She was being manipulated as much as anyone!

I fled the Zashiki Warashi’s roaring fists like a klutz who had accidentally knocked down a hornet’s nest and then I spotted small Hafuri sitting on the porch in her purple kimono.

The Aburatori sat next to her.

They seemed to be watching the Furutsubaki duo from afar, but they had yet to actually join in.

“Are you not afraid of me?”

“Unfortunately, I claim to be a guardian of children,” said the old man who hid his expression below a bamboo hat with an eye pattern drawn on it. “For the other Youkai, it seems to be an issue of how they view you…no, how they view the term Hyakki Yakou. Plus, I knew the man named Majina and saw what Hyakki Yakou was during his time, so to me it seems odd to fear Hyakki Yakou.”

“…”

Hafuri fell silent for a moment.

“That man plotted to usurp Hyakki Yakou and began a national zombie outbreak to split the organization.”

“That was only to oppose the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi and protect the world you live in.”

“But…wait, how could you possibly know that?”

“The human heart is easily drawn to evil, but is also easily bound to good. If something grows even slightly distorted, you can readily

accept yours and others' deaths. I know that all too well. I saw who Majina truly was ten years ago. They say people never truly change and I doubt he would have changed that easily. His actions must be strictly judged, but we cannot take away why he did it. Not even the gods in heaven can do that."

What did those words mean to Hafuri?

Majina had had his reasons for his actions. Someone in Hafuri's position would be able to figure that much out, but how many people were there who would accept Majina's reasons? Hafuri and Mei's opinions were biased as they were family. And the members of Hyakki Yakou worked for Hafuri, so their acceptance would sound like nothing more than kind words for her. But the Aburatori was looking in from outside and he had accepted Majina. Maybe not his crimes or his results, but he had accepted his humanity and what had led him there

Then something moves past my feet.

It was the Fox, Tanuki, and Badger.

"My, my. What are you doing here? It's time for tea!"

"Hm? You aren't afraid of me?"

"A lot of the others seem to be, but we realized we had already worked with you at Goldmine Island. We already know you don't bite."

When the Fox held his front paw out as he spoke, Hafuri thought for a moment and reached out a hand.

She shook that tiny, tiny paw.

The Badger shook his head vertically as a nod.

"And we also realized you look a lot like our master's granddaughter. We hear you're helping as an individual instead of as Hyakki Yakou, so we felt there was no reason to hold back."

"Eh heh heh. So leave it all to a wet nurse Tanuki like me! This is heated barley tea, so it has no caffeine. It's perfect for young children."

"I-I am not so young I need a wet nurse!"

Hafuri blushed and raised her voice, but the Tanuki smiled and said, “Oh, dear.” The Usuhiki Warashi joined in while shouting “kyah kyah” and started eating the tea cakes. She too may have been used to Hafuri after Goldmine Island and Hafuri scolded her a little when she started drinking the hot barley tea from the teacup Hafuri had reached for.

I also saw the Kura Bokko, Notabariko, and the other Usuhiki Warashi from the Goldmine Island inn gathered together.

“Wow. Being in the territory of a real Zashiki Warashi is making me nervous…”

“The red one and white one are both made by Hyakki Yakou. And then there’s the half-human one.”

“And I feel really overshadowed with that ‘kyah kyah’ girl acting like the representative of Usuhiki Warashi.”

The helpful Oomukade pushed on those three girls’ backs and they managed to join in.

The one-eyed Umbrella and Lantern must have decided Hafuri wasn’t that scary even if her emotions were a little rocky because they came out after observing from behind a sliding screen.

“It’s true she doesn’t seem that different from our master.”

“Nonsense! Hiro-sama is far cuter!”

That set a great wave in motion. The Keseran Pasaran, a white puffball said to bring good luck, floated over toward Hafuri and the Furutsubaki duo slowly inched closer.

It looked like things were going to be fine.

Then I heard the sound of a shifting panel overhead.

I looked up to find a square of the ceiling opening up and Marguerite the Australian Witch poked her head out.

“Jinnai Shinobu, could you hand me that duct tape? I need it.”

“Yeah, Westerners rely on crowbars and duct tape about as much as a knife and fork, don’t they?”

I grabbed the roll from the sunken hearth and Marguerite leaned

further out. In fact, she crawled out so she hung upside down with just her feet caught on the edge of the square.

But…

“What’s this, Marguerite!? It looks like you have horns, wings, and a tail!”

“Oh, these?”

“And that’s one hell of a micro bikini! Man, it’s something else entirely when an authentic Westerner wears one!!”

“I guess you would care about that most.”

For some reason, the witch hat didn’t fall off even when she was upside down. And they must have been demonic parts because the blue fabric of the skin-tight gloves and knee socks was wriggling a little.

The exasperated sounding witch traced her index finger along the underside of the micro bikini top’s shoulder strap.

“I’ve temporarily fused with the Succubus to help the ritual go more smoothly.”

“Yahoo, master!” said the Succubus’s voice from somewhere. “If you miss me, just call for me. Your dreamtime partner is right here!”

“Well, her master contract is connected to you, but we added in a bypass to trick the contract. Demons don’t actually have physical bodies, but a Succubus is a rare exception. They have the power to construct their own body and we’re using that to hide her in my womb by-…”

“Hmm. Maybe it’s gravity doing it, but boobs have so much more impact when they’re upside down! And other than ‘that’ and I guess ‘that’ too, there aren’t many other poses that give you such a good view…”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“And did you say you messed with my demon contract? Succubus, this isn’t like opening a hole in the bottom of the bucket of my soul, is it!?”

“I wouldn’t screw up like that, master. It’s just sharing your senses a

little. Oh, and your lifespan."

"Hold up! Is there no going back on that!?"

"In some rare cases, it can fluctuate pretty wildly and end up something like a market crash."

"Now you're really scaring me!!"

I needed to calm myself down. And hadn't she mentioned something about my senses?

"Nn."

I tested it by touching my right ear and for some reason the upside down micro bikini woman gave a little jump. She pulled up her shoulder like something tickled and acted like she was holding something between her right shoulder and cheek. Yes, almost like someone had blown on her right ear.

"Oh?"

"Calm down, Jinnai Shinobu."

"Ohhhh!? That means…what does that mean? What happens to Marguerite if I touch my own chest right now? I'm not doing anything to anyone, so there couldn't be a problem, right? Because I'm not doing anything to anyone!!"

"…!!!???"

Marguerite trembled and blushed, but she squeezed her lips tightly shut to keep her voice from escaping.

Now, a question.

I had to calm down and think about this. Were my senses really linked with the blonde witch's? Or was a silly boy getting all worked up on his own while he groped his own chest? Which was it!?

I figured the odds were 50% or greater that it was a lie. After all, this information came from a Western demon and lying was pretty much their job. And not the heartwarming and kind lies. They would heartlessly laugh at you afterwards.

"No," said the Succubus's voice. "Marguerite really is trying hard

not to moan right now."

"The entire point is that I can't trust you. Here's the tape."

"Kh."

The witch must have also enjoyed putting on deceptive acts because her shoulders trembled as she hesitantly took the roll of duct tape from me. Her breaths seemed strangely heated and seductive.

"Pant, pant. I thought I was prepared when I heard we would be mixing Eastern and Western, but the rules of the paranormal really do run on…well, it would be nice to call them rhymes, but it's really more like puns."

"Hm? Puns?"

"In Japanese, four sounds like death and nine sounds like suffering, so even adults will avoid those numbers. And Oni wear tiger striped loincloths because Oni are traditionally associated with the northeast, which is close to the direction associated with tigers. Power is more easily summoned by images simple enough for a child to understand, but you need to be careful because unintended associations can create new connections and allow the power to escape. It's like how gathering water is easy but maintaining pure water is hard."

"That does seem to be how it works. A lot of the legends about gaining eternal youth are based on wordplay. For example, there are apparently no religious rules behind the idea that eating soba at New Year's helps you live a long life."

"Have you seen those prayer charms for passing exams?"

"Crazy, isn't it? But don't worry. The Japanese know how silly it is. It's like a special product for an annual winter festival."

As we continued our chat(?), I heard a commotion from the living room.

Marguerite waved and ducked back into the attic, so I went to deal with the commotion.

The two red and white Zashiki Warashi were tilting their heads together in the living room.

I followed their gazes.

“How in the world did this happen?”

“Oh, papa.”

“I am Shisa. The Yuki Onna is in trouble.”

The Aoandon and Shisa spoke up as soon as they saw me.

As for the Yuki Onna…

“K-kyuuuuuuuuh…”

Why was she stuck on her back in the gap between the floor and the short-legged stand for the 50-inch flat screen TV?

I peeked on the other side which wasn’t cleaned often and had a lot of dust. I could see the Yuki Onna’s face and she looked about to pass out.

“We had to get behind the TV for the big renovation project, but she decided to climb below the TV stand because she didn’t want to move it.”

“And she got stuck?”

She must have struggled a lot on her own because her kimono had mostly come off of her lower body. While a kimono seemed to provide high defense, they didn’t have to move much for them to become entirely useless.

“Is it just me or have you gotten bigger, Yuki Onna!? Your size is completely off!”

“U-uuh… That lazy Youkai distorted destiny, so I ran into some old friends… Th-that got me fired up in a bad way, so my body ended up like this. That damage was like something from a tenth or twentieth year class reunion, so a child like you wouldn’t understand, Jinnai Shinobu.”

She was a little more sexy than usual.

It was possible she had gotten stuck because she wasn’t used to the size of her body.

“What should we do, papa?”

“Um, I take it from the state of her kimono that you already tried pulling her out by the legs.”

“I am Shisa. Her stomach or hips must be caught because she would not budge.”

“It’s my chest or butt!! I’ll kill you, you summer Youkai!!”

We could rescue her right away if we moved the TV stand, but I could understand why the Yuki Onna had wanted to avoid that. That proper method would be a huge pain. We would have to unhook the TV’s antenna cord, the power cord, the fiber optic wire for cable, and all the wiring for the DVR and game systems. Then we would have to move the equipment out of the way. Only then could we lift the TV stand.

So…

“Let’s leave rearranging the furniture as a last resort and go with the standards first. If we get her wet with detergent or something, she might slip right on out.”

“Heh. Eh heh heh. Jinnai Shinobu getting me wet!? Not bad. Yes, not bad at all! This is clearly an unnecessary detour set in place by the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi, but I don’t even care!!”

That was when the perfect Youkai, a Nure Onna, showed up. She must have been tired from the work because she was wetting down her body at the sink in the kitchen adjacent to the living room.

When I explained the situation, the woman with wet hair (and see-through clothing) simply pointed to the TV stand with a troubled look.

I looked back over.

“Eh heh heh. Eh heh heh heh heh. I-if you like you could use salad dressing or a mysterious sticky liquid that falls into the ‘joke goods’ category. Eh heh heh heh heh…”

“Ahh… Papa, I think the TV stand is starting to freeze. The gap below is probably entirely filled with ice. Throwing water on her would just freeze her in place even more.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

As I complained, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

Mei, the Zashiki Warashi in a white yukata, had silently approached at some point and she handed something to me.

It was a candle that had likely come from a disaster-preparedness bag.

“Ehh!? I kind of get using the fire element on the ice element, but isn’t a candle getting a little too kinky!?”

“(Jump!?) Eh!? A candle!? (Fidget fidget)”

The Yuki Onna struggled without knowing what was going on, but she had no way to resist while stuck there.

Perhaps because she too belonged to the candle element (?), the Aoandon tilted her head with her forehead horn glowing with its bluish-white phosphorescence.

“Huh? You’re not into that, papa? I thought for sure you’d be all for a chance to enjoy the Yuki Onna’s reactions.”

“Well, while I do want to sleep with as many women as possible, I can’t stand seeing a girl who honestly isn’t enjoying it. It’s a total turn off. But if she really wants to do it, then I’m prepared to do just about anything!!”

Yukari hit me for my honesty.

And she used her fist too! Aren’t girls supposed to slap you!?

“I am Shisa. So what do we do about the Yuki Onna? I feel bad for her like this.”

“…”

“Hm? What is it, Jinnai Shinobu? Why are you picking me up?”

“I-it can’t be…” said the Yuki Onna as she trembled on her back below the TV stand.

Yes.

“A candle might be a bit much, but rubbing a summer Youkai against her shouldn’t be as bad, right?”

“W-wait, Jinnai Shinobu!! That is a fatal combination, much like dropping a popsicle on the hot asphalt!”

“Ehh? The Shisa won’t work?”

“Yes, that’s right. He won’t work at all.”

“In that case… Hey, Marguerite.”

“Eh?”

“Do something about this. Witches are pretty general-purpose, so you can handle any element right? Use some kind of fire magic.”

“How will that help!? If a candle was too much, why would you think fire itself would be fine!?”

“Ehhh? It’s magic, so won’t it just all gently melt away?”

“Let her roast you a little first if you think that!!”

As she hung upside-down from the attic with her wonderful micro bikini, Marguerite thought for a bit and held out a strange item that looked like a magnet on the tip of a red-painted plastic umbrella.

“It’s cliché, but summoning a Salamander might work. I’ll restrict the amount of the gathered element to keep it at the size of a chameleon.”

“Hee hee hee!! What is that licking at my calf!? That isn’t a dog or a cat! That’s the creepy sensation of a lizard!”

“Didn’t I say it was a Salamander?”

“I-isn’t there…isn’t there a better way of warming my body!? Oh, I know! You could wrap a string of Christmas lights around me like this and that to tie me up tight.”

“And how are we supposed to tie you up when you’re stuck under the TV stand?”

“I-I have a hint: how do young men and women warm each other up inside mountain cabins in the winter?”

“No, thank you. If I embraced something that’s fifty below zero, I’d freeze to death. Ask me again once you’re a little weaker.”

“No, not the toes. Why is this animal licking between my toes so thoroughly!?”

Oh, I think it’s working.

It was looking like I wouldn’t need to grab the Aoandon’s head and use her as a candle for the Yuki Onna. I had been worried her phosphorescence wasn’t really all that hot.

“Ah, ahh, ahhhhhh… Jinnai Shinobu is attacking me with an animal. It’s the animal that is tormenting me, yet Jinnai Shinobu’s will is working through the animal… H-how am I supposed to process these feelings? …I-it’s too much!!”

As the weird orange-glowing lizard or chameleon played around with the Yuki Onna’s calf and toes, the frozen TV stand gradually thawed. At the same time, the Yuki Onna shrunk.

Once her usual bodylines were back, she slipped right out.

We had finally rescued her.

“Sigh… That was extremely silly, but maybe we should see it as odd that we’re getting trapped by these silly things at this time of crisis. The Ver. 39’s curse is frightening indeed.”

“I feel like we’ve just started to blame her for everything unpleasant.”

“More importantly, papa, what do we do now?”

“?”

I tilted my head at the Aoandon’s question, so my far too well developed daughter clarified.

“For the big renovation project. We can’t move on until we finish behind the TV.”

“…”

We all turned toward the wet Yuki Onna.

She was the perfect size now and she would be slippery too since she was absolutely soaked.

“W-w-w-w-w-wait! Please don’t all push me at once! I just proved I

don't fit! Ah-ahhh!! Is this more of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi's interference!? Mgyuhhh!?"

Part 8 (Hishigami Mai)

"Anyway."

"What is it?"

We were in a certain metropolitan area and I was a little chilly with just a jacket over my tank top and hot pants. The nature-loving Sunekosuri looked a little nauseous, so I started talking to distract him.

"Why are you still working for Hyakki Yakou? You found your wife Ohatsu, so you've returned your whole family to Gisuke. I don't see any more reason to stick around."

"I thought the same thing at first," replied the Sunekosuri in my arms. "But when I started collecting my things, I felt reluctant to leave. I had finished everything I went there to do and there was nothing more of value for me to do there, but I was still hesitant. That's when I realized that, while Ohatsu and Gisuke are important, that isn't all that's important."

"Oh? So you found a new objective while working in this underground business?"

"I'm not sure. The era is going to change and Hyakki Yakou is going to run across all sorts of dangers, so they'll want as much help as they can get. I just can't bear to turn my back on Hafuri-sama and the others and leave on my own. My family is important and they need a peaceful life, but…but that isn't all. I'm not just an accessory to my family."

"Those are some dangerous words."

"I know that. If Ohatsu heard me, she'd probably bite me for real. But I can't just return to the peaceful world and abandon everyone I've fought alongside for so long. I want to remain their allies and I want to remain a part of Hyakki Yakou. I can't lie about that."

The stuffed animal changed the subject there.

“What about you, Mai-san?”

“Me? This is purely business for me. The young lady and the Ver. 40 apparently went to open a hole in Noukotsu Village, but they paid me a fair bit in advance. I’m only doing as much work as they paid for.”

“Even though the Japanese yen could be utterly worthless any day now?”

“…”

Oh, I see.

You’ve gotten some guts, Sunekosuri.

I carried my partner over to a tour bus with tinted windows parked on the side of a metropolitan road and I knocked on the door.

The Supplier who owned the special machine claimed it would let him survive even if an asteroid hit the earth and triggered an ice age, but now he was curled up in a corner of the giant vehicle.

“Mai-san, I screwed up. If I’d known this was going to happen, I wouldn’t have worked so hard to build something that could endure on earth. I would have built something that let me abandon the earth.”

“If you’re gonna go that far, wouldn’t it be faster to turn yourself into an octopus alien? I thoroughly modified my own body, so I could help you out.”

“Mai-san!!”

“Ah, don’t cling to me with tears and snot all over your face! I was joking! Just joking!!”

I did understand why the cowardly Supplier would be so afraid of the approaching extinction of mankind, though.

The Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi issue was ground zero, but the derivative moral hazards were nothing to sneeze at either. The commotion in the TV news, newspapers, and online news was only the tip of the iceberg. It had reached those of us in the underground businesses too.

Yes.

Underground businesses dealt in money as well.

It wasn't generally known (in fact, the very existence of the businesses wasn't), but the overall circulation of black money underwent changes too. That meant bubbles could form. Just like how the value of land and classic cars could skyrocket with no connection to the actual economy.

"So how are things going for you?"

"Probably the same as for you, Mai-san. Just looking at the requests I get makes me hate my life."

"I figured as much. I've been getting more and more people approaching me without using any real middleman like they have a death wish or something."

"Eh? Eh?"

The Sunekosuri seemed to feel left behind at my feet.

But I'm super nice, so I decided to help out the pretty Youkai.

"There have been a lot more requests to kill people. And the amount they're paying keeps going up. Of course, there's no real set price for underground jobs like theft and killing. It's a world of market value and suggested value. But those have been jumping all over the place and we've entered an age where people buy a single burger with a stack of cash. Nothing good comes from giving idiots a ton of money!!"

"B-but aren't you an agent that gets unofficial orders from Hyakki Yakou!? And they're giving you jobs as casually as ordering a burger!?"

"Some want me to silence their nagging mama, some want me to attack a teammate so they can take the regular spot, and the list goes on. It's like the price is skyrocketing while the value of the job is tanking. But if I don't do anything, I bet some other assassin will show up to do it. After all, these jobs are far easier than attacking some strictly guarded VIP after investigating their transportation route and bodyguard arrangement. And they still pay plenty. Those other assassins are probably still cautious since these might be traps, but anyone can make a ton of money if they throw out their

pride."

The excessively high payments were probably stopping people for the time being.

People had a weakness for what they considered a fair price. For example, who would believe a 200 yen diamond was real? Before getting into the quality of the jewel, they would be blinded by the questionable price. The excessively high payments were the same. They would assume some ulterior motive and suspect something bad would happen to them when they showed up for the job.

But anyway.

Once the moral hazard burned through that normal suspicion, there would be no stopping it.

And did those amateurs innocently making requests like some kind of king realize that a client with no backbone could more easily make money by attacking them for everything they had than by actually doing the dangerous jobs? It was possible someone was already writing up a list.

"But that's not the worst part."

"Eh? Th-there's more?"

The Sunekosuri trembled at the Supplier's deep voice.

"The worst part is that the biggest increase isn't in that kind of casual killing. Yes, yes. It's been a while, since *these jobs were coming in*. And I thought I'd forgotten how the dark side of society could drag an individual's heart into such awful places."

"There's a lot of another kind of job," I nonchalantly explained. "*Requests from cowardly people who want to be gently killed.* It's from people like politicians and presidents of major corporations. The country is still celebrating the greatest festival it will ever see, but those with real power understand that this is the end of the world. Those in control of the world have all thrown in the towel and are spending their personal fortunes on suicide. Pretty harsh, isn't it?"

"…"

The Sunekosuri didn't seem able to ask any more questions.

Or maybe he was afraid of getting any more answers.

As I wondered which it was, a call reached my satellite phone. He was persistent, I'll give him that.

I hit the button to reject the call.

"A-are you sure, Mai-san?"

"It's fine, it's fine. Don't worry." I waved my hand dismissively. "It's just a VIP of the Hishigami Group asking me to kill him. I don't have time to deal with his pathetic complaining."

The Sunekosuri shook violently, but it was hardly a surprise for the Supplier.

"Oh, so they're doing that 'aboveground' too?"

"I take it that means the same thing's happening 'underground'?"

"Juunin Toiro, Meikyou Shisui, Shinshutsu Kibotsu…and well, all the elders from groups like that. Although they have to maintain appearances, so they send the request under a false name and through several intermediaries."

That was why we were visiting him.

Although the Sunekosuri didn't seem aware of it.

"So that means…?"

"Yes." The Supplier nodded. "They've used some tricks to hide it from the normal routes, but a few high-ranking members of Hyakki Yakou have made requests too. They feel they can (in a way) trust you, so they want you to kill them as if putting them to sleep. How long is this going to last?"

Hmm.

If people on that level have thrown in the towel, it might just last until the end of the world.

Part 9 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The work ended up taking two to three days.

I had been worried my impatient dad and grampa would drive out all the freeloaders (or that the Ver. 39 would manipulate destiny in that way to stop us), but they somehow managed to restrain themselves.

That was partially because I persuaded them, but it also had to do with help from my Youkai-loving mom and gramma. Then again, this too was probably due to the power to manipulate destiny.

But not the Ver. 39's.

I mean Zashiki Warashi Yukari's.

The two powers were in conflict. It looked like comical Youkai getting into trouble, arguments over whether to let them stay or kick them out, and a small-scale fight to save my girlfriend, but the scales actually held the runaway credit rating agencies, the collapse of the government bond system, and a global panic covering the entire planet's population of seven billion. That was just how much power the Ver. 39 had.

I couldn't let the adorable appearance of the local events fool me.

I couldn't let my guard down around these exhausting events.

What I had to fear most wasn't a ferocious beast's giant maw that could bite through steel and it wasn't a genius criminal with a nightmarishly clever mind. It was that I couldn't even reach the actual battleground. We were going to all this effort just to stand on that same field. We were walking on and on through the labyrinth and being pressed to give up on our own.

I had to keep going until the very, very end.

I had to save my girlfriend Yukari by freeing her from her bloodstained trait and from the Ver. 39's power which would bring ruin to the world.

I couldn't let myself leave those rails. No matter what.

So…

"Jinnai Shinobu!"

The Youkai may have been able to sense it better than a human like

me.

The Package was complete.

The Aoandon called out to me from the side.

Either due to her experience in Hyakki Yakou or her senses as a half-Youkai, Hafuri picked up on something and shouted a warning.

“Hurry up and use this!! A great fluctuation is appearing! At this rate, you’ll have at most one chance at this!!”

I glanced at what she threw toward me and saw the kaleidoscope spinning through the air.

The Aoandon and Hafuri were unable to say more.

Or maybe my sense of time simply vanished. I heard a sharp sound. Mei, the Zashiki Warashi in a white yukata, had started glaring intently at me in a way she never had before. She had done something. She had used the Ver. 40. But for what? I already knew she wasn’t our enemy, so it must have been to protect me from something.

Even if I wanted to see what it was, I couldn’t even turn my head while engulfed in the field of stopped time.

The kaleidoscope flew extremely slowly through the air and I sensed some new footsteps.

A red form approached from the tea room.

It was my beloved girlfriend.

It was Yukari.

But something wasn’t right. The Good-for-Nothing Youkai stood just ten meters away. She hung her head a little in her red yukata, but it no longer had a flower pattern. Instead, it had human handprints. But not adult ones. The countless eerie handprints were of small children.

And it wasn’t just that she had changed into a new yukata. The handprints moved freely along the surface of the yukata as if tracing themselves along my girlfriend’s seductive bodylines. It was like a projection mapping on a building wall.

“What…?”

Red was the symbol of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi, so was this the Ver. 39 running out of control?

Once I realized that, the presence of the spinning kaleidoscope grew much larger in my mind. It was the first and last piece needed to seal away the Ver. 39’s ruinous power. Grabbing it would reject its destiny. That was why this paranormal phenomena had started and why the Zashiki Warashi had transformed. With each millimeter the kaleidoscope approached my hand, she had to be leaving reality at a quadratic rate.

The Zashiki Warashi’s yukata had become a sea of handprints. Her ankle-length black hair began to move. Something danced within that hair that had the luster of polished ebony. They were bones. Specifically, human skulls. These too looked like they belonged to small children. They swam freely through that sea of fine black hair like the moon reflected in a lake at night. Sometimes a skull covered her bangs, sometimes one circled behind her with the long black hair acting as a screen, and sometimes one clung to the side of her head like it was rubbing cheeks with her.

Then I recalled that the Zashiki Warashi was an aggregation of the children killed during famines and the like.

She took the form of a sexy Youkai, but if someone like Majina of the old Hyakki Yakou broke her down into her original phenomenon, countless deaths would cling to her.

These had not attached themselves to her. They were coming out from within her.

That was why we had built the Package.

That was why I was attempting to grasp that first and last chance.

And the skulls swimming through her hair used a low, low voice to give me a simple but absolute command.

The voice seemed to come from the headphones she always had around her neck.

“Die.”

It was filled with hopeless malice.

The almost childishly simplified statement was innocently sharp. That may have come from the mentality of those children killed to have one less mouth to feed.

Then the distorted sense of time came to an end.

My fingers finally touched the kaleidoscope.

I grabbed it.

“Yukari.”

I called her name, but I already knew deep down that I wouldn’t get an answer.

She changed again.

She passed some kind of limit.

She was now the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi. She was something meant to invite death to the world.

So I said more.

“I will bring you back. I will save you.”

My senses returned.

A moment later, everything vanished.

Except for the Zashiki Warashi and me, the entire world became a tatami mat floor that stretched beyond the horizon.

It went far beyond the concept of projection mapping. My ability to verbalize it was about at its limit. Her long black hair slithered like snakes and hid more than half her face. Small decorative jewels glared at me like twisted eyeballs. Countless handprints moved across the yukata that contained her bewitching body. The entire world had been blotted out as soon as they had dripped from the bottom of the yukata like drops of water and reached the floor.

“…!!!???”

The tatami mats were bright crimson, as if soaked with fresh blood.

The heavens were pitch black, as if dyed with evil.

Flames flickered atop tall candlesticks lined up at even intervals as far as the eye could see. Those flames were the only light source. Candles were commonly seen as symbols of life or a lifespan. There was also the eerie legend about a Zashiki Warashi predicting a fire before its family declined and fell into ruin.

It was all so colorful and psychedelic. Everything grounded in reality had been erased from this world.

But I kind of understood. I had no proof, but I felt like I understood since I'd been with the Zashiki Warashi all my life.

A Zashiki Warashi manipulated destiny.

But they were not destiny itself. They were just the controller or the terminal. In other words, there was something deeper. You could call it the main unit or the server. We had been dragged up from the world we normally lived in and had reached a higher "stage" where that server lurked.

You could call it the hidden side of the world.

Or maybe it was the source code hidden behind the browser that gave it a nice understandable visual form.

It was possible I couldn't properly grasp what this place was using my five senses. It may not have actually been what I was seeing. It was just like how the ancient Greeks used a combination of animals when imagining a monster. I couldn't deny the possibility that it was just so psychedelic that the resources in my mind could only throw together some kind of montage to show me.

This was probably beyond what the human mind could comprehend.

What did this look like to the Zashiki Warashi who was always in contact with this?

But to my eyes at least, something pulsed down the surface of the candlesticks with each flicker of the flames and then slithered along the crimson tatami mats. I could not help but understand that this was causing "something" to happen in the world we knew.

Messing with that would destroy all of the emotions of the people working so hard to live day in and day out.

Then it hit me what exactly the destiny controlled by the Zashiki Warashi really was. I didn't even have to confirm it.

It came down to inevitable decline.

It was the idea that decline was inevitable for even the most prosperous person.

That concept had worked itself deeply into the Japanese psyche over a thousand years or more. Think of Dan-no-Ura, Honnouji, or Sekigahara. Even historic figures who influenced an entire era were forced to accept their own ruin as inevitable when the powerful, powerful fangs and claws of destiny reached them.

But there was nothing odd about it showing up here.

I mean, that's just what a Zashiki Warashi was. They brought prosperity when they arrived at a house and they drove the house to ruin when they left. They were truly the messengers of inevitable decline. That was a concept you couldn't remove or ignore when talking about a Zashiki Warashi.

There were beginnings and there were endings.

There was creation and there was destruction.

There was life and there was death.

There was no opposite pattern. It was inevitable, so it was only a matter of sooner or later. Whatever the speed, the gears could only turn in one direction and those gears were the true essence of a Zashiki Warashi. And as I was trying to forcibly turn those gears in the opposite direction with the kaleidoscope, the Ver. 39 seemed to speak to me.

It seemed to say I had successfully acquired your beloved and that was exactly why destruction must come to me.

It was truly awful.

The greater my success, the greater the absolute defeat that would follow.

It was the extreme form and original version of the childish idea that people had a fixed amount of luck so if something good happened, something bad was sure to follow.

Inevitable decline was a truly frightening sort of destiny. It was an unshakable malice and nothing could be more persuasive as every Japanese person understood it. Everyone assumed good luck would not last forever and often even wanted to see the successful suffer. The nail that sticks out gets hammered and we all fall equally. It was a subconscious aggregation of evil thoughts. It was a dark inheritance that no one had ever been able to throw out.

It could be the Taira clan and the Minamoto clan.

It could be Oda, Toyotomi, and Tokugawa.

Even if they had conquered Japan, that ultimate and solitary law would drag them down from the stage of history and force the end of an era onto them. In a way, it was a form of destiny that every Japanese person could picture just by closing their eyes.

But.

Even so.

That didn't matter.

I didn't care what it was. What I knew was simple but could not have been more critical. The Ver. 39 had been gently using natural shifts in destiny to interfere with us before, but it had finally decided drastic measures like this were necessary. It had brought out the handprints on her yukata and the skulls in her hair while showing off this hidden side of the world. This could not have been worse for me, but the same went for it. This dead end was also my best chance of turning this around.

And turn it around I will, Ver. 39.

I don't give a crap about inevitable decline. I won't let you turn this success into ruin. I'll turn this ruin into success. You could only settle in and leave and you could only give out and take away fortune on a whim, but I'll show you a new path.

That said, I didn't really know what I was supposed to do with the kaleidoscope.

But when I reflexively took a step toward the Zashiki Warashi, a change assaulted me.

"?"

The skulls used her headphones to howl emptily at me.

“Die.” “Die!” “Fail.” “Ah ha ha!!” “You’re going to fail.” “Are you stupid?” “Ee hee ha ha ha!!” “Why are you taking this so seriously?” “Die!” “Give up.” “Everyone must die!!” “Stop.” “Shut up.” “You’re an eyesore.” “Shut up!” “The way you take this so seriously is just a pain.” “Ksh.” “Kssshhhh!!”

The deluge of noise lost all meaning and became a single cracked roar.

It was on the move. Faint drops of light ran through the Zashiki Warashi’s long glossy black hair.

As soon as that light dripped to the red tatami mats, an infinitely expanding ripple instantly flowed to the horizon in every direction.

That was when it happened.

The way was forcefully closed. Countless translucent and glowing red sliding screens closed in from the left and right between Yukari and me. Some symbols were drawn on the surfaces, but there were too many of them to make out any individual one. I simply saw the Zashiki Warashi standing beyond that red color.

It looked like less than ten meters, but the infinite number of ultra-thin screens created an absolute wall in my way.

They were red.

They were bloodstained.

They seemed to be refusing anyone that would shake her existence, her coloration, and her essence.

“To hell with that…”

What did those screens mean and what were they really?

Why would I bother thinking about that?

“To hell with all of this!!”

I gathered speed and prepared to kick through them rather than open them.

Immediately, I felt my sense of time die once more. This second

time, it finally occurred to me that it was much like the feeling of running out into the road and finding a tanker truck approaching you. It was a lot like having your life flash before your eyes. When I felt that and had the incomprehensible phenomenon surround me, I finally realized what those translucent red screens were.

Each and every one was filled with just as much “death” as a speeding tanker truck. An endless supply was lined up before my eyes as a barrier that I couldn’t breach no matter how many lives I had.

Part 10 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

We had no choice but to do it.

We used the Yakata-II cruise ship’s trading room to wage war with the Hishigami Group that was interfering with the satellite debris business by sending debris to the earth, including the nuclear batteries and tanks of dangerous rocket fuel. Seika-san and Madoka-chan bought up the rocket launch brokers they were trying to use while we made waves of posts on the message boards and forums people from that business used. We insisted that the Hishigami General Trading Group was doomed to fail and working with them would end badly.

There were plenty of ways to send something into space these days.

In addition to the rockets and shuttles managed by the government, there were projects by companies and universities that launched single-stage rockets from high-altitude airplanes or giant balloons that reached the stratosphere. Groups and organizations with the tech to leave the atmosphere were popping up like bamboo shoots after a rain.

That meant buying up and crushing each and every one would no longer work.

The infinitely expanding possibilities defeated our limited buying ability. We had to close off those many possibilities by informing the world that they would gain nothing by working with Hishigami. That was our only chance.

And yet…

“Warning: They’re doing this to help us all, so why would you try to make them sound dangerous? Do you just want attention? Are you shilling for someone?”

“Squall: And when the killer satellites detonate to bring down the debris, won’t the exploded killer satellites make new debris? It’s like a perpetual motion machine! It’s a never-ending lottery!!”

“Kitty Lion: If you’re against this, you must be one of those people getting rich off the satellite debris. Yes, yes. Pay them no heed. Better luck next time!”

…

…

…

“Damn, it’s no good! We’re telling the truth, but they make us out to be the bad guys. How can they rejoice at a civilian project that’s going to contaminate the entire world!? Do they want to see destruction that badly!?”

“You might not be that far off the mark,” muttered Enbi. “There isn’t some mastermind behind this. Hishigami is becoming something of a symbol, but they aren’t directly manipulating the information. This is the overall will of the internet. They’re averting their gaze from the destruction as they approach the cliff. Doesn’t it look like they’re enjoying the aesthetics of destruction? Just like how the ancient Greek empire had its fill of all kinds of entertainment and then decayed amid corruption and degeneracy.”

“I refuse to believe that,” I spat out.

It may have been true Japan was enjoying the festivities. The network and the bonds magic trick had given them plenty of money, they had bought everything they wanted, and they had nothing else to spend their money on, so they were pouring money into this nonsense.

But that wasn’t all.

In Intellectual Villages, there were plenty of farmers who created those valuable vegetables. There were also plenty of living national

treasures. There were craftsmen whose metalworking could not be recreated by the precision machinery in the city and performers who continued the traditions of noh and kabuki.

In fact, it didn't matter if they had special qualifications or a name everyone knew.

It could just as well be the people working hard at convenience stores or gas stations. Or the daily paper boy and the delivery service for old folks with weak backs. There were plenty of people working to keep the gears of society turning without getting involved in these festivities!

And you expect me to believe they were drowning in desire and wished for death?

Nonsense.

People were free to grow world-weary and let their hearts fester if they wanted, but I couldn't let that subsection of the rich drag everyone else down with them!

This may not have been the core of the issue and it may not have mattered to Shinobu and the Zashiki Warashi, but no matter how far removed from the center this was, people were still suffering. Then how could I allow it to continue? I had to stop it here!

Enbi must have liked how I had replied so quickly because she giggled next to me.

And she spoke.

"Then let's continue our futile struggle to the very, very end."

Once the Mystery Freak said that, I heard a confused voice from Madoka-chan.

"We have some requests coming in. Um, they're from… PSI_ver_RAIN and Anemura Kaede???"

"Finally." The twintailed demon snapped her fingers. "One's an online idol whose new songs reach thirty million views within twenty four hours and the other's a regular member of the national idol group Tarot Girls 22. With them on our side, we can change the direction this is headed! We can destroy this disgusting mood of pessimism!!"

Part 11 (Hishigami Mai)

A tremendous blow hit the Supplier's modified tour bus. The entire vehicle shook. My focus shifted to the handgun hidden in the heel of my boot. The large bus weighed a dozen or so tons on its own, so it wouldn't budge from a normal vehicle collision.

That meant something just as big had hit it.

The Supplier had been driving it around, but now he gave a wide-eyed shout.

"Mai-san! A twenty ton truck is attacking! Any ideas who it might be!?"

"Oh, honestly…"

I looked out the tinted windows and a call reached my satellite phone.

I kept rejecting the calls, but he couldn't take a hint!

"Hi, Mai. It's your brother. I couldn't bear it any longer, so I came to discuss it with you directly. Could you maybe destroy the Hishigami Group we've constructed!?"

"Kyou-chan, what happened to the reasonable-obsessed brother I knew? Not even the underground businesses crash their vehicles together like a Hollywood movie in this camera-filled city!"

"Hah hah hah. Didn't I tell you? We can only obey what people consider reasonable. Look at the city around you. This is spreading without end. We're approaching a world where this kind of dangerous driving is perfectly normal."

I heard screeching tires.

But it did not come from our bus or Hishigami Kyou's truck. A few fancy Italian cars had drifted through the intersection right in front of us. It looked like the drivers were college aged if not younger. And based on the roar of the engines, they had clearly been tuned to pro racing standards. These were not cars that should be driving on public roads.

If they lost control at that speed, the sidewalks would become a sea of blood in no time, but the crowds were cheering rather than screaming. They were starting to turn their smartphone and cellphone lenses toward the cars as they uploaded photos to their blog or gave commentary on a live broadcast.

It could not have been sillier.

“What counts as reasonable is only going to get more sickening.” The voice seemed to be cursing that fact. “Do you know what our company is doing now? We have no choice but to be dragged down with this god-awful moral hazard!!”

The heavy masses crashed together and sometimes knocked down telephone poles and streetlights, but I was focused elsewhere.

Specifically, the roof of the truck’s trailer.

The bodyguards with names like Zei and Akane wore the kunoichi-like Yozakura suits while hiding below cloaks covered in patterns that used the science of perception to divert attention away.

“This isn’t good. They’re going to board us, Supplier!!”

“So please do something about this!” said my brother. “Isn’t that your role, Mai!?”

With those words, red Zei, blue Akane, and yellow Ran lightly jumped between the two vehicles and smashed through the reinforced glass to get inside.

Youkai medicine had been used to artificially implant these monsters with Hishigami Women traits.

I ignored the storm of glass shards and took a breath to prepare myself while Zei tossed aside her cloak and spoke with no expression on her face.

“Assist us, original.”

“Oh, shut up. Unlike you artificial ones, I have no obligation to help a rich man with his hobby.”

“That is fine.”

I had not expected that answer.

Zei jerked her chin toward the truck.

“Throwing our lives away for Kyou-sama would be our greatest joy. His meeting with Uchimaku Hayabusa should have planted the seeds of a pleasant change inside him. We cannot allow that sprout to be trampled, even by Kyou-sama himself.”

“…”

I fell silent.

As a ferocious wind entered through the broken window, the Sunekosuri ran back and forth in confusion.

“What do you want me to do?”

“That truck is not meant to destroy the target by crashing into it. It is a special vehicle created to carry something.”

“Hold on. You don’t mean…!?”

“Ou.”

Zei spoke a name.

That name meant “slaughter”.

“She is a failure based on the anti-human Hishigami Enbi. If she is activated here, this city of thirty million will be destroyed. Kyou-sama’s rational side is just barely holding him back now, but if the reasonableness afflicting him grows any more distorted, there will be no stopping it. We want you to cut the storage pod from the truck before that happens.”

Part 12 (Jinnai Shinobu)

“…”

I still didn’t know what the screens were.

But the Zashiki Warashi’s Ver. 39 power to control destiny had likely done something.

It was getting in my way, keeping the kaleidoscope away, and protecting its system.

It was using the law of inevitable decline to rob me of success.

“See?” “You failed.” “You’ve failed.” “No chance of success remains.” “You will die.” “You will fail.” “You will lose everything.” “You tried to act cool.” “You tried to act important.” “But you only embarrassed yourself.” “So watch as you lose everything.” “Reach for it.” “Realize you can’t reach it.” “Die.” “Die!” “Die!!” “Ksshh!!”

The skulls displayed in the Zashiki Warashi’s black hair mocked me through her headphones. They were saying I’d fallen for their trap and stepped onto the rails of ruin on my own. And they did so with a childish sort of evil.

But…

“Ha ha.”

You little brats.

Do you really think you can steal my girlfriend from me?

You might as well have already given me the answer.

If the Ver. 39 was working this hard to keep me away, there had to be a good reason for that.

I didn’t know how to use the kaleidoscope.

I knew nothing about occult Packages.

If it hadn’t done anything, I might have wandered aimlessly until I ran out of time.

But it had pointed my compass in the right direction.

And in the most difficult direction.

Thanks for telling me I just need to get close to the Zashiki Warashi, Ver. 39!!

“Ahhhh

seemingly stopped time brought on by the fear of death.

It felt like the very space around me was cracking.

But then red filled my vision.

——And deep within the rising fear, “it” truly assaulted me.

After a bright flash, I found myself somewhere other than the infinite expanse of tatami mats.

I saw nothing but gray dust for as far as the eye could see. It was a rural scene filled with every form of contaminant imaginable. In this land of the end, simply breathing in and out and simply blinking my eyes filled me with such intense pain that I thought fire was bursting from every hole in my body.

“Gblgh!! Agweh!! Glgah!!!!”

I somewhat understood.

This was the Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi.

She could control not just the current destiny, but create a brand new branch of destiny.

Those barriers.

Each and every screen contained an image of hell. It was those images that Buddhist monks drew on screens as a simple warning of what would awaited those who were excommunicated. Those screens of light had a thickness approaching on zero and they were filled with images of failed destinies, mistaken worlds, and hells.

So this was a parallel world that could have happened. It was the result of a mistaken choice on my part. For example, *if I had relied on the CIA at Goldmine Island and the national suicide Package had activated, this is what would have happened to the Japanese archipelago.*

The pain rushed at me all at once.

I coughed up blood, my blood vessels seemed to crawl below my skin, and I clenched my teeth.

Even so, I moved forward.

I bore the pain of an entire world and moved further forward.

——And “it” wasn’t just the one.

I saw the world after the archipelago filled with zombies according to Majina’s plan. The living dead grabbed at my arms and legs, bit into my flesh with teeth that reeked of decomposition, and tore me apart. Finally, I felt the fear of having my body rot from within.

I was swallowed up by that fear.

But I didn’t care if my arms and legs were torn away or if my organs were dragged out.

I just had to move forward.

I had to keep going.

As I clenched my teeth and worked against the powerful headwind, I suddenly wondered what my enemy was here. I knew it wasn’t the Zashiki Warashi, but it might not have been the Ver. 39 either. Countless handprints oozed out onto her yukata and skulls swam through her glossy hair. They would sometimes circle around to the back with her black hair as a screen, they would sometimes cover her bangs, and they would sometimes move the side of her face as if rubbing cheeks with her. But even they may have been a broken safety device running out of control. Inevitable decline. The hidden side of the world where forgotten destinies gathered. The fragments of the ages gathered here, from past events like Dan-no-Ura, Honnouji, and Sekighara to the “what ifs” where mistaken choices had led to ruin for any number of reasons. The entire world was swallowed and chewed to pieces, and the fragments gathered in this graveyard. Had this awful “something” been dragged toward us because the Ver. 39 had carelessly reached it and contacted it?

In that case, this fight wasn’t about good or evil.

It was about putting a lid on the ruinous power pouring down on us. It was about closing the floodgates in a world of neither good nor evil.

I would do it.

I understood that. I understood it now.

It didn’t matter what I was up against.

I would reach my one and only beloved Yukari no matter what!!

——"It" had a seemingly infinite number of layers.

In a world where I had failed to stop Archdemon Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier who did not quite qualify as one of the seven deadly sins, I was swallowed up by such great sweetness that my entire vision grew bright red and I convulsed with blood pouring from every hole in my body.

"Gah…bah!! Khah!? Cough!!"

In a world where the Aoandon's plan had succeeded, I learned true exhaustion and weariness as I wandered endlessly through an empty rural scene where none of the Japanese remained.

"Ah, ahh, ahhhhhh…."

In a world where the worst of the deadly Youkai, the Aburatori, had taken control of time, space, and destiny, I nearly went mad from the psychedelic scene of organs hanging from the branches of every tree as far as the eye could see.

"Gyahhh!! Gyagahhh!?"

In a world where Kawabata Megumi, the old woman who had created the Aoandon in Zenmetsu Village, had succeeded with her plan, I felt the intense pain and fear of having my body thoroughly chopped to pieces by Kusanagi which precluded all defense and evasion.

"Oh, kh…! Khah!!"

In a world where Australian Witch Marguerite Steinhols had obtained the Succubus, I was continually afflicted by the dreadful sensation of having my soul rot thanks to Western magic.

"Ah, ahh…"

In a world where the Akki Rasetsu agent named Saijou successfully modified the Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake, she controlled all Youkai and filled me with the despair of having my body utterly devoured.

"…"

In a world where the coup d'etat of Hyakki Yakou had succeeded, I

was overcome with the tremendous heat of all my body's protein boiling as the Illness Magic User took over the Fuuka Village hotel.

"……"

——No matter how far I went, "it" never ended.

Worlds created by a wrong decision were slammed into me one after another.

As all the pain rushed to a single point, my body trembled so violently I thought I would bite my own tongue.

I had no idea how much time had passed.

I felt like I had been wandering for a hundred if not a thousand years.

But the true despair did not come from the pain or the fear itself.

I noticed something.

Even after all that, I noticed I had only moved forward a few centimeters.

"……f……"

How much farther did I have to go?

How long would I have to do this before I could reach the Zashiki Warashi? In fact, who had even guaranteed that this would end after making it a certain distance? If the Zashiki Warashi…no, if the inevitable decline controlling her decided on a whim to take a step backwards, this infinite hell would grow even longer.

"He's given up." "He's given up!" "He's given up in front of his woman." "Throw him out." "Let's throw him out." "He'll break." "He'll break now!!" "Kee ha ha!!" "Yes." "You can't reach anything." "You can't reach it." "You'll just die." "Die!" "Give up." "Break already!" "Now." "Now!" "Now!!"

The white skulls swimming through her glossy black hair looked at me and mocked me through her headphones. Countless handprints crawled along the yukata that covered her ample bodylines. Her hair slithered like snakes and covered her face as jewels glared out like twisted eyeballs. This power did not hate anyone. It was not fixated on anyone. It was inevitable decline. It simply took and

simply ruined. It viewed that itself as its goal, like it was appreciating some elegant aesthetic.

Could I really do something about that?

Could I overcome it?

I bit my lip, tasted blood in my mouth, and stared straight ahead.

The Zashiki Warashi was only ten meters away, but she seemed infinitely distant and would not approach me.

Could I endure this that far?

Wouldn't I crumble away into something like a lump of tar?

I would break. I would be destroyed.

If I let go, it would all fall into ruin. The world's destiny or evil spirit that was this law of inevitable decline would only give me a momentary flash of dark joy. I knew that, but I could not stop my heart from heading in that direction.

It was like a growing stomachache on the train when the next station was a long way off. It was like the rapidly growing thirst discovered the instant you stepped out of the sauna and saw the vending machine. The wall of my limit was approaching with tremendous speed. The last ten minutes I had overcome were nothing compared to the next minute I had to overcome. The strength it had taken to endure for a minute might be used up in a single second afterwards. The curve of rapid exhaustion seemed to have quadratic growth. Time itself seemed to be wearing down my fragile soul.

My very self wavered.

And even if I tried to rely on "someone else", I was trapped inside this subspace where the red tatami mats continued as far as the eye could see. The Zashiki Warashi stood before me in this alternate dimension that trapped me in dark death, symbols of ruin, and inevitable decline.

Was it hopeless?

What I sought was right in front of me and I held the kaleidoscope needed to overturn this, but I still lacked something needed to cover

those ten meters. And I could never find whatever it was in this never-ending world of isolation!

But as soon as I thought that…

“I see.”

I heard a voice.

I heard a definite voice in this world where I should have been alone.

“And? I hope you aren’t foolish enough to add ‘so I might as well give up’.”

It arrived like a gust of wind that swept away the disturbing heat filling my head. Moving just a few centimeters had exhausted me to the point that I thought it would fry my brain, but now someone stood next to me.

What? Me?

He had a more solid build than me, he wore a lab coat over a suit, and he wore glasses that really didn’t suit him. More importantly, his eyes were reminiscent of a thick swamp and he had some people standing next to him: Madoka, the Succubus and a short gray demon.

Wait…it can’t be. Are you saying he stuffed Tselika in a machine and tamed her!?

But even though everything was wrong, I still reached a certain conclusion.

That was me.

It was Jinnai Shinobu.

I had never known that name could be defined so broadly.

“Is that anything to be surprised by? This is the singularity where the threads of destiny gather. It’s the rule-breaking land where all parallel worlds are concentrated. So what’s so strange about a meeting between two people who never should have met?”

I was dumbfounded, but then something else happened.

On the other side from him, I saw another new form. It was me, Jinnai Shinobu. However, this one was half my height and looked only five or six.

As soon as I noticed this alternate version of myself, I sensed a great presence behind him.

I didn't have it in me to look back, but I more or less knew what was there.

There had to be Jinnai Shinobus as far as the eye could see. Some might have failed in something and some might have succeeded in something. In the past or the future, they had each taken a different path than me. And altogether, we created a group of nearly infinite number to face those hellish parallel worlds.

"Each individual ruin is an individual death. If the combined failures of the individual named Jinnai Shinobu are the strongest barrier against this personal hostility, then we only need to negate each and every one. To put it another way, each world can only kill one of us."

"…Yeah."

"Simple, isn't it? It has to be. At least compared to the suffering of losing your beloved before your very eyes."

"Yeah!! I know that much!! I know the Jinnai Shinobu standing here…the Jinnai Shinobu that made it this far has to be one hell of a lucky guy!!"

We didn't need a cue.

Our thoughts were united.

"So I'll go for even the cruelest of options. Lend me your strength, Jinnai Shinobu!! I'll show you the gentle conclusion of the Jinnai Shinobu who can call her Yukari!!!!!"

Part 13 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

"PSI_ver_RAIN: If you actually think about it, this doesn't really

make sense, does it? A group that wants to ban speculation on debris is going to send that debris down so people can collect it. Aren't they just admitting it's valuable? Won't the speculation just heat up more the more they do that?"

"Anemura Kaede@Empress: Um, and is it really safe to have satellites falling down to earth? It would have to hurt if a piece fell on you, and even if that requires the same bad luck as getting hit by lightning, that would still mean some definite victims every year. Can anyone who knows more about it tell me the details?"

Those short posts changed everything.

The stagnant water began to flow.

"It doesn't look like a perfect solution, though," said Madoka-chan in her sailor uniform. "Those Hishigami people have set up a donation site. They're trying to raise as much money from supporters as they can to fund a launch as soon as possible! Even if the other companies are reluctant, this will let them buy a free pass with the power of money!"

"It's all over once they reach a certain amount of money. They'll be able to keep going no matter how much opposition there is."

"Like we'll let them do that."

"And how do you plan to fight them?" asked Mishima-san.

I gave a succinct answer.

"Fundraising on the borderless internet is actually a gray zone. If they're suspected of illegally transferring money, they'll have trouble finding supporters. We just have to hit them with suspicion. If people think they'll be complicit in something illegal if they take part, the donations will stop. Even if the police aren't functioning, the brand-name of the guardians of the law should still be effective!"

"Detective, don't tell me you're planning to post under your real name in this freely expanding internet society. The winds may have begun to change, but stir up people's animosity and they'll dig up all the data on you they can find!!"

"I've already asked civilian middle school girls to do the same thing."

I smiled a little and looked to the two posts from the girls who had helped out.

“The adults can’t get cold feet now. These people are trying to send nuclear batteries and dangerous rocket fuel tumbling down to earth, so stopping them comes first!!”

Part 14 (Hishigami Mai)

Things had gotten bad.

The large bus and truck were still crashing into each other. Plus, the back of the truck contained Ou, a failure who would slaughter *at least* thirty million people. I needed to cut away that container to eliminate the possibility of her waking, but the problem wasn’t the 80 kph car chase. It was all the eyes of Tokyo.

Working for an underground organization could be tricky.

So…

“Zei, Akane, Ran. Which one of you is the most useless?”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“Don’t glare at me like that. And don’t start grabbing at each other either! Okay, I’ll be borrowing one of those camouflage cloaks that use the science of perception to trick the human brain and program analyses. I don’t care what happens to you afterwards. You can grab at each other’s hair to settle things amongst yourselves once and for all if you like. The weakest one who loses the game of musical chairs can stay here!!”

“Wait, Mai-san. A fight between women scares me even more than an asteroid! This is going to be absolute carnage!!”

The cowardly man's cries didn't matter.

I pulled the cloak over my head, picked up the Sunekosuri, and jumped out the broken window and onto the truck.

"U-u-um! Why did you throw me out here too!?"

"Stop it, partner. Did you think you could get out of this without playing a role?☆"

We stood on the joint connecting the front of the truck to the container on the back. The heavy metal connector was accompanied by a mess of cables to send signals to the rear wheel breaks and such. No, there were too many of them for just that, so they may have been related to Ou's storage tank.

Anyway, I just had to remove the cut-away safety lock and pull the lever, but…

"It's completely broken!? And there are marks from a gas burner being used!!"

"How can he say he loves being reasonable? He's completely insane."

If Ou awoke, thirty million people would die. That was certain. Plus, it was unknown how far the carnage would spread beyond that. And that of course meant he would die first there in the driver's seat. But anyway…

"So what do we do, Mai-san? Oh, you have a gun hidden in the heel of your boot, don't you?"

"That small caliber handgun can't break such a thick metal connector. And that's too much effort. I'll just break it with my bare hands."

"Waaah! You're as much of a monster as ever!!"

Although I had remade myself to deal with Youkai and not things like this, so I didn't recommend doing these things that would break my own body.

Then an irritated voice reached me over the satellite phone.

"Mai, are you ready? I would really rather not use Ou as a bargaining chip!!"

“Shut up, you stupid brother!! Do you know how messed up things have to have gotten for me to be the straight man!? And I can hear you grinning while you say you’d rather not use her, you unreasonable bastard!!”

“Yes, yes. So you still have that kind sort of reasonableness. I’m jealous. Yes, so very jealous.”

He was hopeless He was completely self-absorbed.

There was no real reason to waste effort chatting with him.

I grabbed the metal connector with both hands and it produced an odd creaking sound. I prepared to pull it out, but…oh, dear. That wasn’t good at all. My shoulders and back were creaking too. I was going to have to replace all of my arteries and muscles afterwards and probably check over my entire skeleton too. For a normal person, it was like swapping out everything but the brain and heart!

But my efforts weren’t wasted.

The joint was like a mechanical dinosaur’s backbone, but it was definitely beginning to change shape.

Just a bit further…

“Hishigami Mai!!”

Red Zei shouted to me from the bus where she was grappling with the others like her.

A moment later, something ran down my spine.

“!?”

As soon as I swung my head to the side, the container’s thick wall was broken through from within. A wet and swollen translucent hand that almost seemed made of liquid pierced straight through the spot my face had just been in. It was not a fist or stabbing fingers. The hand simply grabbed at empty air. It was shaped like a child’s small hand.

But I could tell what that stinging sensation was.

It was death, it was slaughter, it was Ou. If that touched me, it was all over. No defense or knowledge would help. This had nothing to do with the methods or efficiency of killing. It was death on the

fundamental level of one's soul or core.

The flabbily swollen arm pulled back.

A pair of eerily glowing eyes pierced through me from the darkness within the hole.

If the hand had been pulled back, it would be coming again.

Just like an arrow fired from a drawn bowstring, the next attack was coming.

How much of the original Hishigami Enbi did this reproduce? 20%? 30%? Even with the Youkai medicine, I doubted it was even half the original. And this was what she could do? Sister, just how much of a genius are you!?

Sweat poured from my entire body, but I couldn't stop working now.

Once the steel egg cracked open, she would be freed.

At this point, she could still be contained.

So…

"Oh, ohh."

To be honest, Mai-chan probably didn't really need to go along with all this.

Thirty million people would die? So what?

Japan would be destroyed? What did I care?

I could always leave Tokyo, flee Japan, and pull out a beach chair and parasol to enjoy the final paradise on the other side of the globe. A Hishigami Woman could pull off that kind of unfair method.

But even so…

This wasn't about the Hishigami Women and it wasn't about business or the rules of our underground industry. I recalled what the Sunekosuri had said. His wife Ohatsu and son Gisuke were important, but that wasn't all. He wasn't just an accessory to his family and he had gone to Hyakki Yakou of his own free will.

Yes.

This must have been something that I personally wanted to do.

“Oh, ohh,
ohhhh

——To overcome the worst case scenario of Japan being sold off, one had made a contract with Archdemon Tselika, made an enemy of the world, and finally been reunited with the Zashiki Warashi who waited on that contaminated archipelago.

——One had left the small world of Japan with Madoka and spent his time engaging in financial battles with demonic investors who seemed to embody the seven deadly sins.

——One had gained the direct fighting strength of the Yuki Onna, defeated and neutralized extremely deadly Youkai like the Shuten-Douji and the Nine-Tailed Fox, and used them as Shikigami.

——After the death of Nagisa's beloved dog had driven her insane, one had stuck with her to the end, managed to regain her sanity, and used nothing but human power to face the nationwide Youkai controller constructed by Akki Rasetsu.

——One joined forces with Marguerite and the Succubus and managed to rescue the other soul that had been hidden in her womb.

——One had stopped the Aoandon's rampage by teaching her of kindness back in Zenmetsu Village, had taken up the sword Kusanagi, and had fought alongside his "daughter" in the battle over the three Imperial Regalia.

——When Majina had completely stolen Hyakki Yakou away from Hafuri, one had used his Youkai-attracting trait and swore to the sobbing girl that he would create a new Hyakki Yakou that would never hurt her.

——One had built a time travel Package around the Aburatori, used it to prevent the Hyakki Yakou coup d'etat in advance, and truly protected a certain family.

——One had gone the widow route, fallen for Ver. 40 Mei rather than Ver. 39 Yukari, and retrieved her heart with a device that provided salvation.

——One had successfully seduced both Mei, who did not age, and Hafuri, who had grown up, and thought he had won the legendary oyakodon…right up until Majina's ghost came back from the depths of hell during the Bon festival and punched him.

——One, one, one, one…

They may have been different from here, but that didn't mean they were failures. Those were the results of the decisions they had made, but I had mistakenly seen them as obstacles and viewed them as hells. That had pissed them all off. They were insisting that they would take care of and look after their own worlds.

So I just had to look at my own world.

I had to look beyond all those other worlds.

I had to look to the Zashiki Warashi!!

"Ahhhh

eyeball jewels rolled around inside the sea of hair covering her face. It was filled with impatience, anxiety, and rage. But that hostility sent out by the inevitable decline told me everything I needed to know. The end was near. I…we…Jinnai Shinobu was on the right path!

The many Jinnai Shinobus caught up. They passed me by. They smiled as they moved ahead and were burned by those many ruined parallel worlds and by their true hellfire that lay beyond different decisions that, to me, looked mistaken.

So the fear faded.

My sense of rivalry overcame it.

Even if we were all Jinnai Shinobu and even if we all wished to save the Zashiki Warashi, she was mine.

I wasn't going to let any other Jinnai Shinobu touch her!! I wasn't going to let them save her in my place! Even if none of those other conclusions were any better or worse, I was the one that had chosen this and made it this far! So how could I let them take the best part? I was the only one that got to take that Good-for-Nothing Nee-chan in my arms and call her Yukari!! Let me have that much pride, you idiots!!

I clenched my teeth.

I raced desperately forward and reached out my hand.

I broke through all the screens and all the red-dyed images of hell.

I raced across the countless battlefields.

And at the very last moment, I thought I felt a push on my back. I didn't have time to look back, but I had a feeling someone was smiling there. Another Jinnai Shinobu who had made a different decision and couldn't reach this point was leaving something with me.

He was telling me to make my dream come true, to not let her cry, and to put the biggest smile on her face.

Then that seemingly endless distance shrank to nothing.

I held the Zashiki Warashi in the red yukata tightly in my arms.

She was as limp as a doll.

The small skulls and handprints wriggled across her.

No one had told me what to do with the kaleidoscope.

I didn't know how Youkai worked, I didn't know the details of the Package, and I didn't know what kind of techniques or tools supported them.

But the destiny of inevitable decline had wanted to reject that salvation. The skulls in her hair, handprints on her yukata, and jewel eyeballs in her serpentine hair had most wanted to keep me from approaching her. It had put all sorts of obstacles in my way to keep me from doing that. It was like throwing a detective with brilliant deductive skills onto a battlefield with shells flying everywhere or throwing a veteran martial artist into a gag space. Having me fight out of my element had acted as a barrier.

That was what the infinite parallel worlds had been.

They had been nothing more than distractions to get me to lose sight of my goal.

So I just had to stay focused. I just had to look to the Zashiki Warashi and seek what I wanted in the very beginning. It didn't matter if it was out of place, inappropriate, or embarrassing. That kind of self-restraint was nothing more than interference from the destiny of inevitable decline. When I was trying to continue forward like normal, the magnetism and attraction of the situation would guide me off track.

I couldn't let it affect me or sweep me away. I had to stay true to myself.

It didn't matter how pathetic or silly it was.

This had to be the one and only correct answer in this world that was scattered with as many options as there were stars in the sky. I had to trust in myself after my decisions led me this far!! I didn't have the power to save the world, but I had managed to choose the one path that the million other Jinnai Shinobus hadn't been able to. So I needed to be proud of that! It was something I could truly be proud of!!!!

Further strength entered the arms that held the Zashiki Warashi.

I felt her pulse.

The countless handprints didn't matter and the white skulls had fallen silent.

I focused on her face as she looked unsteadily up at me.

We weren't enemies.

She wasn't a threat I had to defeat.

I couldn't forget that.

Yukari was my girlfriend.

And when I was with her, I just had to do what I most wanted to do.

With that alone in mind, I gently placed my lips on hers.

It was like a switch had been thrown.

I heard a deafening sound and the never-ending world of red tatami mats was immediately blown away.

The handprints on her yukata, the skulls in her hair, the serpentine hair, the jewel eyeballs, the inevitable decline, and everything else were gone.

The unpleasant noise from her headphones had grown silent too.

Part 16 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I gulped with the Mystery Freak and the others as we viewed the screens in the cruise ship's trading room. We focused on the message boards that had grown quiet, as if the previous commotion had never happened.

"Does this mean…?"

Part 17 (Hishigami Mai)

In a certain metropolitan area, I watched the container roll away after it broke through the chain link fence of an industrial complex. I wiped the sweat from my brow while clinging to the rest of the truck with the Sunekosuri. That monster was only sleeping and I doubted that would be enough to kill her, but…

"…It's over for now?"

Part 18 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I kissed the Zashiki Warashi.

What purpose did that serve?

Perhaps it was important that the creator of the kaleidoscope made physical contact with the Zashiki Warashi it was targeting.

I didn't need to know the answer. It had worked and that was all that mattered.

Her full body weight leaned against me.

The next thing I knew, we were inside the familiar tea room of the thatch-roof house. We were surrounded by the Umbrella, Lantern, Tanuki, Fox, and plenty of other Youkai and the Zashiki Warashi seemed embarrassed having so many creatures around her. I could feel her squirming in my arms.

We were back.

We had faced inevitable decline in the graveyard of the world built by the remains of the countless destroyed eras that lay beyond an endless labyrinth of "what ifs".

But we had escaped that terminal of intersecting destinies and returned to our normal life.

"Shinobu, this is a little embarrassing."

"Ha ha. Sorry, sorry."

"And I thought something tasted rusty, but you have a cut on your

lip.”

She brought her finger to my lip and looked at what got on her finger.

“*See? You have all this white blood on there.*”

When I heard those words, I pulled her close again and pressed her head to my chest.

“Sorry…”

I had messed with her head.

And I hadn’t wanted her to see the look on my face when I accepted that fact.

“What is it, Shinobu?”

That considerate question could almost be called innocent.

But I was unable to answer her and simply held her tighter in my arms.

Then I bit my lip again and said more in my heart.

Even if it meant dirtying my hands, I just couldn’t accept a future without you.

Epilogue: After the Prophecy

The unnatural government bonds issue came to a complete stop and the electronic display once more gave the usual rate of 114 yen per dollar.

That was bad news for the people who had made a quick fortune with careless financial techniques and magic tricks, but overall there was relatively little chaos. It sounded like a joke, but the Hishigami Group had not been broken up even after everything that had happened. Being “too big to fail” was a frightening thing.

And as the yen stabilized, the government could calculate out their budgets like normal, so the nearly shut down agencies came back to life.

The hands of the clock were moving as if nothing had happened.

For the most part anyway.

“Hey, Uchimaku-chan. Did the organization finally throw you out? There’s a notification on the P-phone bulletin board.”

“Ehhh!? This is not the kind of surprise I like in the morning! And they’re moving me at the end of the year instead of waiting until March? Where are they sending me!?”

Hayabusa quickly checked with his police cellphone, but it did not look like he was being transferred to a remote region. He was being sent to a newly created office of Investigation Department 1, so it was within the same building.

The Metropolitan Police Department was divided into divisions, which were divided into departments, which in turn were divided into offices. Investigation Department 1 was often treated as a single entity in dramas, but it was split into nine different offices.

“What is this? …Um, the newly created tenth office will combat the many new forms of crime that crop up on a daily basis with a novel approach to-…”

“You’re in trouble. You’re definitely in trouble, Uchimaku-chan. This sounds complicated, but it isn’t actually saying a damn thing. Who knows what kind of dirty jobs they’ll be having you do.”

He made his way to the usual floor, but everyone was acting more distant than usual.

The department chief's warm look bothered him too.

He gathered his things from his desk and started toward his new workplace. The new location mentioned in the notification was not just a newly partitioned-off area. It was an entirely different room down the hall. In fact, he was pretty sure it was the large conference room whose air conditioner had been broken the other day.

"Um, why do you feel like such an outsider? And this doorplate…is this a joke? Why does this say 0-X Office!?"

He could already hear some voices from beyond the thin door, so some others had likely been gathered for this. He decided it would be faster to get an explanation than to worry over it all, so he skillfully knocked on the door while still holding the cardboard box of his things.

Then he opened it.

"Sorry I'm late. I'm Uchimaku Hayabusa and I was transferred to this office starting-…"

"Oh, honestly! You really are late, detective!!"

An unpleasant sound came from his feet.

It was the sound of the cardboard box's contents hitting the floor after he dropped it.

"No!! Nooo!!! That twintailed demon has finally made it to the center of the capital's police force! Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!! "

"C'mon, no turning around and running off. You're a civil servant, aren't you? Then you've gotta obey your orders."

She grabbed his collar and dragged him back into the isolated room.

"Why!? How!? You haven't passed the police exam, you aren't a civil servant, and middle schoolers aren't allowed to work! How in

the world could this have happened!?”

“You hadn’t heard, detective? The cyber-focused parts of the police are using civilians a lot lately. And this newly-created tenth office is specialized in Youkai Packages. It’s for dangerous spirits and other eXceptions to the law, so it’s the 0-X Office. Is it any surprise it’ll be more specialized and unique? Youkai have an affinity with children and young minds are needed to keep up with the cruel new crimes that are evolving on a daily basis. We’ve reached an age where people other than civil servants will be wandering around the Metropolitan Police Department on a regular basis. Scary, isn’t it?”

“Even so, this is way too sudden!” shouted Uchimaku.

No one had unpacked their things, but there were a few people other than Hishigami Enbi in that room. And they were all girls who clearly were not civil servants.

He first looked to a middle school girl with glasses and a braid who was wiping down a table with a rag.

“Hachikawa Tomoe…-san…?”

“Wh-what? Why do you look so surprised?”

“I thought you at least were still a sensible person!!”

“Don’t just start crying!! And I clearly am a sensible person!!”

As Tomoe shouted back on reflex, another black-haired girl patted her shoulder to calm her.

“Um…you already seem to be vanishing away, but are you…?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s me, Tsumada Mio.” The girl laughed and clasped her hands in front of her chest. “But I think there’s someone else you should be focusing on even more. I doubt you could see both PSI_ver_RAIN-san and Anemura-san, the Empress of the Major Arcana, even at a major concert.”

“Ahhhhh!!!!! How could any of this even be possible!?”

They had apparently not been unprincipled enough to completely fill up the old conference room that had held seventy-eight people, but it was sounding like different people could be stopping by to play at different times.

“Wait, wait, wait. Why would they choose these people?”

“I know, right? I thought the police had finally prepared a love nest for the two of us at the taxpayer’s expense, but they just have no tact.”

“That’s not the point!! What is with this extreme moral hazard!? And the thought of being stuck in a closed room alone with you is just scary!!”

“What!? So you’re saying you wanted a garden of young girls around you!? You secret harem lover!!”

“Why do you have to put it like that!?”

Hayabusa looked about to explode, but when Enbi saw the bulging veins in his temples, she decided to show some kindness.

She shrugged.

“It’s supposed to be modern girls who have a high affinity with Youkai plus the one adult leader. Detective, you’re an office chief at your age. …Well, that’ll be your title, but who knows how meaningful it really is. Tomoe and I are in charge of deductions, Tsumada Mio will handle tailing people and sneaking into places, and the idols can use their fans and the media to gather information or get an endless supply of helpers. Look closely, and you’ll see this is an impressive group. Maybe this is a reward from that playful Chief Superintendent. Can you believe it? This paradise is running on the taxpayer’s yen.”

“What is going on? When did the Metropolitan Police Department become a home for school clubrooms? And what in the world are we supposed to investigate with a group like this? I can’t let you do anything dangerous and this will just be a space for middle school girls to hang out if everyone but me stays behind.”

“Oh, c’mon, detective. Not all of us are middle school girls. Those, um, what was it? Oh, right. Those Atou and Tsugawa people will apparently be joining us later.”

“Them!? Now I *know* they just want to make a mockery of the police!!!!”

“And look.”

Uchimaku Hayabusa looked in the direction Enbi indicated.

The smallest girl in the room was sitting atop a desk rather than in a chair. Her white hair was done up like a giant flower and she wore a pure white kimono.

“You’re kidding, right? Are they finally letting elementary school girls join the police if they can show off a useful talent?”

“Don’t be silly. She’s the oldest one here. That’s Hishigami Shikimi, my great great great great great great great great…how many greats is it?”

“Don’t ask me. You just need to know that I’m the founder of the Hishigami line.”

Uchimaku was not even drinking coffee, but he still did a spit take.

“Cough, cough!? Ehhhh!? Hishigamiiiii!!!???”

“That’s right.”

The giant white flower smoothly answered him and lightly waved a diagonally-cut bamboo pipe she pulled from her kimono.

“By the way, this is my Shikigami. Her name’s Enchanting Full

Moon Flower. As you can see, she's based on Kaguya-hime. Her hobby is eternal youth and her special skill is a long lifespan. As long as it doesn't conflict with my orders, use her however you like. If you're trying to win her over with food, I recommend ohagi or rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves. Nice to meet you."

"Waaaaaaaaaah!! We've moved beyond the fantasy of middle school girls! Now there are legit paranormal phenomena in the middle of Tokyo's police headquarters!!"

She seemed to find fresh new enjoyment in the detective's fresh new way of being surprised.

The founder of the Hishigami line had the same look of curiosity and joy as a monster who had found a youth who was honestly surprised by a Hitotsume-Kozou in this day and age. Shikimi gave a cruel and devilish smile.

"I was curious about your conversational ability that's keeping Enbi's murderous side in check. My goal is to be useful to someone just once. If it's to that end, please use me and my Shikigami however you want, *detective.*"

The sidewalk café did not get many customers in December, but it was not actually all that chilly with the spot heater in the outside space.

Hishigami Mai wore a jacket over her tank top and hot pants as she took a sip and winced at a drink with sugar, cream, milk, cinnamon, and a ton of other things dumped inside.

"Ahh, ahh. The world is as crazy as ever."

"Now, now. Don't say that."

A voice answered her from another table.

She sat back to back with Mishima Jun, a VIP from the NPA.

He wore a custom suit and coat while reading through an English language newspaper.

"This was what I always wanted: an investigative agency that specializes in Youkai-related Packages. No matter how many

civilian victims there were, everyone was even more afraid of government authority reaching that underground industry, but I thought this might make a good starting point."

"Do you really think this will work?"

"I've set up some defensive lines just in case. I learned from my previous failure and kept the number of police officers to a minimum while filling the numbers out with harmless…or *seemingly* harmless outside civilians. The people chosen might be a liiiiittle uncomfortable for Uchimaku-kun, though. And the office only deals in the Packages rather than directly judging the Youkai themselves. But more importantly…"

Mishima paused there and continued after a quiet laugh.

"The winds have changed this time."

"You mean the movement to apply civil law to the 592 species of Youkai that can communicate with humans and to protect their lives, assets, and dignity?"

"Ha ha. The fact that it's civil law is important. If we went straight for criminal law like murder, the deadly Youkai that kill as part of their nature wouldn't be able to keep up. It's important to keep it at civil law for now. It's the first step."

"Well, your goal never was to kill Youkai."

"…"

Mishima flipped a page in his English language newspaper in an intentionally noisy fashion.

"If Youkai fall under the management of the law, then I thought the law would protect them. At the very least, I thought they wouldn't be hunted down to add them to a collection or make strange drugs out of them."

"Is that where you found a connection with Majina and Mei? No, I suppose if anyone it would've been Ohatsu."

"But the people who just wanted to do whatever they wanted with the power of Youkai fiercely opposed the idea. Ha ha. At the time, Hyakki Yakou was divided between a moderate faction and an extermination faction, but it was the extermination faction that

plotted an assassination. Strange, isn't it? They were the ones insisting we had to exterminate all the Youkai because we could not allow any more victims, yet they decided to kill someone once they were afraid of winding up on the wrong side of the law."

A short silence followed.

After a while, Mishima asked a question.

"That's enough about the past. What is the current Hyakki Yakou going to do?"

"Who knows. At the very least, they haven't cursed you to death, so I think they're simply observing the situation. If the existing Youkai can be bound by the laws, they should be fine with that. And since Hyakki Yakou continues to reign even after such a fierce battle, I doubt any of the other organizations are going to oppose them on this."

"I see," muttered Mishima. "So what will you do?"

"Me?"

"The environment around Youkai is changing. And in a way that doesn't require the disaster brought by the Hishigami Women. But…will you be able to give up that violence of yours now that it isn't needed?"

"Hey, boy." After listening to all that, Mai gave a truly cruel smile. "I don't know what kind of delusional fantasies you have in your head, but let me tell you one thing."

"And what is that?"

"There is no such thing as a world without conflict. At the very least, not as long as at least two humans remain."

It was a simple answer and that woman did not hesitate to give it.

"Hyakki Yakou will control the underground society? Youkai-related crimes will dwindle away? So what? Sparks of conflict are scattered everywhere. The end of one problem is just the harbinger of a new problem. If Packages are no longer usable, a new type of crime will appear. If Youkai are no longer usable, people will start using demons and spirits instead. Will we be seeing Onmyouji next? Or Shikigami summoning battles? …Let me be clear. The next age is

already here. Demand for me will never die."

"Perhaps so."

Mishima Jun honestly admitted it.

He tossed the English language newspaper to the table as if to ignore everything up to that point.

But when he turned around, there was already no one there.

Hishigami Mai had set off alone to the next age.

"Wahhhh!"

In a thatch-roof house of Noukotsu Village, Jinnai Shinobu heard someone crying.

"Wahhhh! Wahhhhhh!!"

Confused, he made his way to the front door and found a small child crying there. The boy may have been from the same village, but he did not recognize him.

When he sighed and asked what the matter was, he received the following answer:

"Um, um! I was told to come here to tell someone about Nee-chan's issue! I was told to go to Jinnai Shinobu for any Youkai problems!!"

"Who's been spreading that kind of troublesome rumor?"

The most likely suspect was the elementary school couple made up of a boy loved by Tsukumogami and a girl who got along really well with animal and bug Youkai, but it was best not to suspect people without proof.

And that was not the core of the issue anyway.

It was starting to rain and the boy looked up at him with tears in his eyes.

"It's about Nee-chan. My Youkai Nee-chan."

"What? Hold on…this sudden rain shower. Is this what they call the

Fox's Wedding?"

"She isn't doing it because she wants to! I know how Tseli Nee-chan secretly cries on her own at night! She doesn't want to get married!!"

"Wait…"

Shinobu stopped the boy.

He did not like the sound of some of the boy's comments. Cries at night? Doesn't want to get married? But no. That was not it.

"Um, when you say 'Tseli' Nee-chan…"

"Tseli Nee-chan is Tseli Nee-chan. Tselika Nee-chan."

"Vweeeeeeeeeeehhhh

Jinnai Shinobu scratched his head in annoyance.

It was the look of someone who thought they had finished all their summer homework and then found a bunch they had not done on the day before the new term.

“It is true that there was one person we didn’t save. I kept saying I can get along with any Youkai, but like this, I can’t exactly say I’m doing that.”

“Master! She’s a demon, not a Youkai! If you approach Tselika when she’s gesturing you over and spreading her legs in the middle of a gigantic spider web, you’ll definitely die! No, you’ll meet a fate worse than death!! How about you ask Marguerite about that!?”

“Nn.”

Shinobu looked over as the witch began trembling from the reminder of her trauma.

“I don’t need to go visit the demon’s castle. Marguerite, you draw a magic circle over there and summon Tselika. You can do that in three minutes, right? Hurry.”

“Noooooo

Then he wiped his tears away with the back of his hand and looked up at Jinnai Shinobu.

“I still want to go save Tseli Nee-chan.”

“I couldn’t ask for a better answer.”

The next thing he knew, they were shaking hands.

To Jinnai Shinobu, this was no longer a kid he did not know. He did not look down on him or treat him as an inferior.

A little hero stood before him.

Even now, the era was changing.

The boy who had been able to join forces with any form of the paranormal had missed just one, but it may not have been his job to save her.

This was a new era and Jinnai Shinobu nodded as he saw this boy moving to the forefront of that era.

“Madoka, Nagisa!! Give me some help. We’re about to make the impossible possible.”

“Ehhh!? I’m still worrying over what kind of distance to put between us, Shinobu-kun, but you’re just going to ignore that and use me? How cruel are you!?”

“Eh heh heh. Bonds come in more than one form. I’ll do my best, in more ways than one.”

The Yuki Onna was observing from behind a pillar and she cut in with her irritation at the limit.

“If you’re going to cheat like that from the get-go, why not use someone who can fight more directly like me?”

“Jinnai Shinobu’s Hyakki Yakou is on hold for the time being. And if I start using stuff like that as easily as a rock-paper-scissors hand, the convenience would make me too lazy. So, Aburatori, you’re staying home too. Oh, and…Aoandon! Come here!!”

“Why!? What a pain!! Didn’t you just say you aren’t using deadly Youkai not ten seconds ago!?”

“You’re coming along for some social studies. Didn’t I tell you it’s a parent’s job to show his kid the beautiful side of the world that’ll keep you from thinking you should destroy it?”

“Boo, boo.”

The Aoandon pouted her lips, but she did not try to run off.

Preparations were underway, but then the Nekomata made a calm comment.

“Are you going to ignore your wife at this important time and head off to interfere with this marriage? And from what I’ve heard, this is like the cruelest marriage scam imaginable.”

“I’ll head out real quick and be back before you know it. I’ll make it in time somehow.”

“I was listening in, but this is that Tselika, right?”

“Yeah. But this boy says he’s going to save her, so there’s no helping it. Someone’s finally shown up who wants to save that hopeless archdemon. He immediately made the decision I couldn’t. How can I look down on that or take it lightly? How many millions of years do you think it’ll take before a miracle like this happens again? The blatantly malicious marriage stuff doesn’t matter. She tramples on people’s hearts as easily as breathing and takes lives as naturally as keeping her heart beating. This can remove the need to directly face the cruel and evil essence of that archdemon. …I need to take this seriously since I wasn’t able to defeat her back then. Let me make up for that before this important day really gets started.”

The boy let out something like a groan and Jinnai Shinobu pointed at him.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

He had no proof of that whatsoever.

“It’s true I wasn’t able to reach your level. I never even thought of saying anything as crazy as wanting to save Tselika. To be honest, boy, you’ve got me beat. But let me say one thing: I can still be of some help. This might be the beginning of your era, but let me at least provide some reinforcement from the side.”

These were the words of a man who had grown after overcoming

and accepting many different things.

“After all,” he added with a smile. “I can get along with any Youkai.”

Now for the next item of news.

The Supreme Court’s Third Petty Bench has ruled that not applying a portion of civil law to the 592 species of Youkai that can communicate with humans is in violation of the constitution.

This ruling will bring an end to a series of legal battles.

Justice Haruoka Makoto commented that “their desire to bring humans and Youkai together will now be brought to a national level and it is only natural to grant them this blessing. As a guardian of the law, I hope this ruling will act as a precedent of good that will give everyone a push in the right direction” and he expects this will help resolve similar problems.

The focus of this ruling was on the right to life, property rights, and personality rights. It is thought this will improve the past situation where a Youkai alone could not even sign a cell phone contract.

However, there are fears this will create an obligation to pay for residence taxes and utility costs.

Property rights include the donation and inheritance of property, but this has led to a new movement in relation to marriage.

If a human and Youkai were to have a child together, it would be appropriate for that child to receive the same inheritance rights as a legitimate child. Also, to make equal marriage between human and Youkai a possibility, the government offices around the country are accepting the appropriate paperwork while also registering the Youkai partner in the family register.

This had begun new movements across the nation and the first registration for a human-Youkai marriage was submitted this very afternoon. It was submitted by the same individual who fought for this ruling, a Noukotsu Village resident named-…

Afterword

And with that, this is Kamachi Kazuma.

Complete!! I guess this is the first time I've written a definite end to long series. I've worked on a few different series, but The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village didn't have a normal beginning from even the earliest stages and I think there were seriously more than ten hurdles that had to be cleared before the first volume saw the light of day. Its first physical appearance was in the magazine short story project, but I personally think there were several small miracles even before that.

For example, what if the magazine project itself had not started that year? What if Mahaya-san had refused the project? What if Mayaha-san hadn't requested I do the text? What if the character roughs had never arrived and the completed illustrations had suddenly arrived just before publication? What if there hadn't been a precedent of that magazine project leading to a full novel?

And all of those coincidences were out of my control. That's why it almost feels like a divine miracle that all the pieces fit together so the first volume could be released.

Of those, I think the biggest one was the great impact of the original character roughs Mahaya-san sent over. You might be able to tell how much of a shock it was if I tell you that was what led me to carelessly write 400 pages of text for what was supposed to be a 2-page magazine project and that the story eventually grew into what you hold in your hands.

Even after that, Mahaya-san has been the type to provide a lot of detailed character roughs, so while I'm working, I end up thinking I'll be in trouble if I start thinking this extraordinary environment is normal. I always have to remind myself that I can't let myself grow too used to it.

And due to that process, this series was unlike my others in that I started it without knowing how it would end. I just threw in what I wanted to see, what I wanted to do, and what I wanted to try out at the time and then used the foreshadowing that created to connect to the next volume. (For example, Volume 1 already stated that

Hyakki Yakou's leader was dead and Volume 4 had the Zashiki Warashi crying because of Shinobu and the Aburatori's relationship.) I just repeated that process to create one long line, so this may have had the most experimental structure of any of my series. That's why there were multiple candidates for Jinnai Shinobu's perfect form. You might think of the A Simple Series when it comes to experiments, but in a way, Intellectual Village was even more experimental than that. So I of course didn't know what the final boss would be when I started the first volume. When I looked back over everything I had written and linked everything together, I realized it was the idea of inevitable decline. That had destroyed Hyakki Yakou's "parent organization", Hafuri and Majina had cursed it, and it could be seen in the predetermined ruin contained within the fortune brought when a Zashiki Warashi settles down. I'll leave it to you to decide if it fit as the theme of the series.

One especially important aspect this time was the protagonist(s?). Jinnai Shinobu, Uchimaku Hayabusa, Hishigami Mai…and I can tell you now, there's actually one more. Back when I saw this as magazine short stories, I had a protagonist pair for each of the four stories I had quickly prepared, but do you know who they were?

The three protagonists that came to the forefront were all intentionally given characterizations that deviated from the usual Kamachi Kazuma style of story. That's what gave me some freedom to have them do things I normally couldn't have my protagonists doing. The most obvious example is probably Mai, but it applies to Shinobu and Hayabusa too. It might be fun to think about how it applies to them.

Going the standard route, playing it safe, and using a demerit system is useful if you're aiming for the top, but if you keep doing that, the land grows barren and you wander into a dead end. I remember arranging the characters and gimmicks for Intellectual Village while trying to expand my horizons as much as possible. You might be able to see that in the fact that there isn't a good word to describe the overall genre of the series. I'll let all of you decide whether "occult comedy" really fits or not.

Due to Kamijou Touma's memory loss in Index and the starter pack plus expansion pack structure of Heavy Object, I felt like I hadn't had a chance to do much in the way of flashback stories, so being able to do that in Intellectual Village may have been the best part.

It was fresh and fun making connections between the characters such as Shinobu's blond hair coming from the influence of Hayabusa in his high school days.

I especially liked using a time paradox to bring back Majina and the others as enemies at the end of Volume 7 even though they were supposed to be dead before Volume 1 even began. I also liked showing that good acts do not always bring about good results.

This is going to get a little meta, but one more thing.

In Volume 9 especially, I took advantage of my chance to write about a lovey-dovey couple after they get together, something I haven't had much of a chance to do. (As you know if you've read it, Chapter 1 was quite comfy in a way different again from Waltraute.) It turned out Hayabusa and Enbi were only being distracted by the Ver. 39, but I still enjoyed writing about them as much as about Shinobu and Yukari. I just regret that I didn't make anyone on Mai's level who could be her lover!!

On that note, I did consider having Mai show up in the Metropolitan Police Department instead of Shikimi. (Yes, they were close enough for Mai to have Hayabusa meet her in a café in Volume 1). Then the sisters would have been fighting over him, but since that would have overshadowed the sub-heroines, I went with the way you saw it. Just like with Perfect Shinobu, if Hayabusa had abandoned the path of a police officer for some reason and gone for another form of justice such as a private eye, a mercenary, or a bodyguard, maybe he could have had both Killer Enbi and Agent Mai for himself? But anyway, I think Mai's idea of romance would be something similar to a female praying mantis.

Now, to be honest, I don't actually know that much about Youkai.

Compared to Western magic, I think my pool of knowledge was quite shallow. You can see that in the fact that the first story of Volume 1 used the super popular Youkai girls of the Zashiki Warashi and the Yuki Onna. But the more I dug into the topic, the more I found. It was quite refreshing and I remember filling the story with all sorts of Youkai and their traits.

Among those, my favorite was the Aoandon.

When you talk about the most powerful Youkai, people tend to think of the Kurama Tengu or the Nine Tailed Fox, but the Aoandon

gathers together the strange phenomena of one hundred ghost stories, conveniently appears at the end of the Hyakumonogatari, and has an artificial origin since she was invented by a famous Youkai artist. As a combination of one hundred ghost stories, I thought she could singlehandedly rival the Hyakki Yakou which is made up of one hundred different species. Plus she's a blue female Oni. Everything about her tugged at my heartstrings. Hishigami Mai used the Deadly Dragon Princess, an entirely artificial Shikigami, but I think the Aoandon transformed into something similar within me.

I used the idea that Youkai exist outside the normal human frameworks by having them be paranormal beings that surpass physical phenomena while also not being clearly good or evil.

I did this to help fight my usual bad habit of making characters clearly good or clearly evil (although this shouldn't be surprising since my other series are battle-focused).

Lastly, Volume 9 completes the Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village and I think it suggests another perfect form for Jinnai Shinobu. The important part is that this version is not standing back to back with the Perfect Shinobu in Volume 5 Side A and they aren't opposites. I think you need to see them as facing the same direction as they walk along parallel paths that will never cross.

Jinnai Shinobu intentionally used his Youkai-attracting trait, made his own Package despite hating them so much, and did everything he could to save the Zashiki Warashi. They were the "same" boy up to there, so what was the difference between that one who reached Volume 9's ending and the Perfect Shinobu who did not? I hope you will discuss that amongst yourselves.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. As I already said, this series was made possible by a number of small miracles from start to finish. If even one button had been pressed wrong along the way, not even the first word would have been written. I must thank them for everything they did to bring about that success. Thank you very much.

And I also give my thanks to the readers. When I started Volume 1, I never thought this would be a story of Jinnai Shinobu growing up

after remembering his kindness, but how did you like it? I hope you will accept their conclusions with surprise and kindness.

Even now that it has ended, I hope it will remain in your hearts.

There is a lot of mystery and fun quite nearby, isn't there?

-Kamachi Kazuma

Series complete!

Thank you very much for sticking with us this far.

I was told I could write an afterword, but since I don't really have anything I want to say in words, I'll just use an illustration rough that wasn't used in the volume itself for a variety of reasons.

-Mahaya

The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village - Volume 9

Author: **Kamachi Kazuma**

Illustrator: **Mahaya**

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